CDNA Connecticut Daily Newspapers Association
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March 22, 2013

Testimony in Opposition to the Governor's Budget Proposal HB 6354 An Act Implementing the Governor's Budget Recommendations Concerning General Government - Freedom of Information Commission

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Senator Harp, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Chris VanDeHoef, I'm the Executive Director of the Connecticut Daily Newspaper's Association (CDNA). CDNA represents all 17 daily newspapers in Connecticut - CDNA strongly opposes the budget proposals concerning the Office of Governmental Accountability (OGA) set forth by Governor Malloy and his Administration.

As you are aware - this has been noted in many newspaper editorial pages across this state - the Governor's budget proposals would put the recently created position of "Executive Administrator" directly under the control of the Governor, remove the ability of the watchdog agencies that comprise the OGA authority to reprimand or fire the Administrator and finally, and potentially most dangerous, the Governor - under these proposals - would have full authority over the budgets of these agencies. These proposals would substantially weaken our state's watchdog agencies; rolling back measures that legislatures of the past have put into place to protect the autonomy of the watchdog agencies and maintain the public's confidence that its Government was open, accessable and free of corruption or undue influence by those in power trying to hide questionable activities.

Other measures of this budget proposal include placing the attorneys of the agencies of OGA into one new office: "Office of Hearings". These attorneys would be expected to ignore any conflict of interest that might arise between two agencies and work in concert on issues that might pit one agency against another. CDNA anticipates a time when Ethics is investigating the Governor's Office (regardless of who the sitting Governor is) and the Executive Administrator steers the attorneys to thwart the Ethics investigation. Or, worse, provides "guidelines" to FOIC or Elections that would prohibit Ethics from obtaining information that would be beneficial to their investigation.

All these measures save the state, based on the Governor's budget arm, OPM, a paltry $187,000. Why go so far to shake the public's confidence in the openness of government if the savings is so minimal and inconsequential to the overall state budget?

It's troublesome to the newspapers in this state that the Office of the Governor would oversee - via a political appointment - the agencies that have been created to be autonomous and at an arm's length from any political influence. It would mean, among many other things, one could no longer use the word "autonomous" when describing the watchdog agencies. They would simply become another political arm to serve at the pleasure of the Chief Executive Officer of the State of Connecticut which is in opposition to everything these agencies were created to be and stand for decades ago.

Newspaper reporters frequently use FOIA to obtain documents, attend meetings or gain information about a particular investigation its reporters might be working. It raises a high level of discomfort to the print news industry - and all news gathering interests in our opinion - that a political appointment will have authority over the integrity and execution of requests before these agencies. FOIA was designed to shine light on what our government is doing, to allow those who are interested to access the necessary information to provide the public with facts on what's happening in our state's government. How long before an Executive Administrator shuts down the "wrong" information from getting out?

Turning the keys of our state's talented and competent watchdog agencies over to a political appointee who has been appointed by an office that can come under investigation by these very agencies gives the newspapers in Connecticut a very uneasy feeling. It should give the legislature the same uneasy feeling.

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