

Claude Albert, Legislative chair, Connecticut Council on Freedom of Information

In support of S.B. 204, An Act Requiring Marketing Contracts Involving Public Institutions of Higher Education To Be Subject to Disclosure Under the Freedom of Information Act

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I am Claude Albert, legislative chair of the Connecticut Council on Freedom of Information. CCFOI is an organization that has been committed to furthering government transparency and accountability for more than half a century. We strongly support S.B. 204, An Act Requiring Marketing Contracts Involving Public Institutions of Higher Education To Be Subject to Disclosure Under the Freedom of Information Act.

CCFOI has long been concerned over the delegating of government functions to private or quasi-public agencies without assuring the transparency that allows the public to determine if it is being well served.

In a glaring example germane to this bill, Webster Bank signed an agreement that makes it a major sponsor of University of Connecticut athletics and will help the school build a basketball-training center. The university has refused to disclose the contract or say how much money the university is receiving or what benefits Webster is receiving in return. The university is claiming that the information is exempt from disclosure because the contract is between Webster and a private marketing firm UConn has hired to administer key athletic marketing functions.

We object to this evasion of the FOI Act on a matter that is obviously of public interest that both benefits and obligates a major public institution. The people of Connecticut, on whose behalf this deal is struck, deserve to know what terms have been signed onto in their name.

In fact, we at CCFOI would broaden this legislation to revoke the blanket exemption to the Freedom of Information Act that now shields the University of Connecticut Foundation from public scrutiny. We appreciate the foundation's role in providing resources that elevate the university. Various specific exemptions in the Freedom of Information Act may well apply to some of the foundation's activities. But we believe the foundation acts largely as a surrogate for the university in fund-raising, marketing and grants administration, and it should not enjoy a blanket exemption from FOIA.