

Editorials are the institutional voice of The Free Press and independent of the newsroom reporting staff

## OUR VIEW: TRANSPARENCY

# Subject Legislature to data practices law

For too long, the leading institution of representative democracy in Minnesota has escaped the disinfectant of sunshine.

The Legislature has never been subject to the Minnesota Data Practices Act, but in a rare move Gov. Tim Walz is now advocating the most powerful body in Minnesota government should be more transparent. He has proposed the Legislature, like the executive branch and counties, cities and schools, become more transparent by making itself subject to the rules of openness and good government that the Data Practices Act offers.

### Why it matters:

The Legislature escapes public scrutiny because it has exempted itself from the Minnesota Data Practices Act.

It's troubling that GOP Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka opposes the transparency that Walz's proposal would bring.

But this is not a partisan issue. Former GOP Gov. Tim Pawlenty told The Free Press last year he also favors subjecting the Legislature to the Data Practices Act.

In fact, a survey of legislators before last year's election showed 37 DFL and six Republican candidates or incumbents favored applying the open records laws to the Legislature.

Eighty-four DFL and 80 GOP candidates or incumbents did not answer the questions of the survey at all. We hope that is not an indication that their enthusiasm for such transparency is somewhat lacking.

Among area legislators, DFLer Rep. John Considine, Mankato, and Republican Jeremy Munson, Lake Crystal, said they favored applying the law to the Legislature, while GOP Rep. John Petersburg of Waseca said he was undecided. The rest of the area representatives did not complete the survey.

The survey was sent to all candidates for the Legislature and executive branches by the Minnesota Coalition on Government Information, which has long advocated for this law and other laws that increase government transparency in Minnesota. The questionnaire was supported by the Minnesota Society of Professional Journalists. (Full disclosure: Free Press Editor Joe Spear is past president of the organization).

It's notable that Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison also supported the change.

Walz sent a letter to Gazelka recently saying he welcomes discussion of the issue during the next legislative session. But Gazelka later told the Star Tribune that he doesn't recall agreeing to discuss that issue and opposes the proposal.

Gazelka and Rep. Pat Garofalo, R-Farmington, argue that subjecting the Legislature to the Data Practices Act would threaten the privacy of constituent communications, arguing constituents write letters about very sensitive topics like drug abuse and sexual assault.

But that argument is a red herring. The Data Practices Act already designates such communications as confidential.

Both sides have in the past offered proposals that would make the dealings of the Legislature more transparent, but it's been rare that a governor has supported that. Now it's time to move forward with this good government proposal to make the Legislature's business more transparent.

The information subject to disclosure would include complaints against legislators and investigations involving their conduct. These kind of disclosures are already required of the vast majority of state agencies, cities, counties and schools.

It's time the Legislature get on board. We urge Walz to push for the changes and we urge all legislators to embrace them to create transparency in the most powerful body in Minnesota.

Candidate and legislator positions on transparency through the MNCOGI survey can be found here.

<http://tinyurl.com/y5wqhnrn>

## THEY SAID IT

**"It sounds really good on a bumper sticker, but once you research it for 30 seconds you realize this is a horrible idea. People have an expectation of confidentiality when they are reaching out to legislators with problems."**

REP. PAT GAROFALO, R-FARMINGTON

FOUNDED IN 1887

# The Free Press

1st Amendment: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

STEVE JAMESON, Publisher

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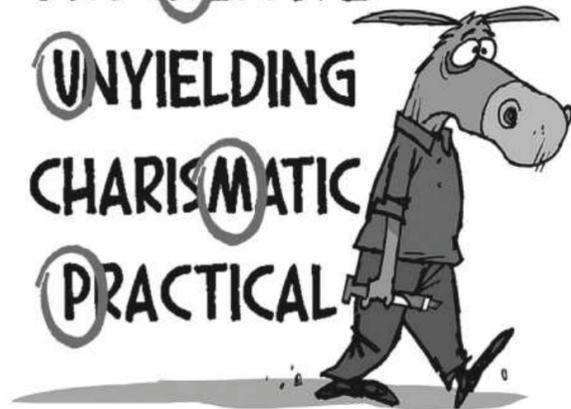
## LETTERS POLICY

The Free Press welcomes letters on any issue of general community interest. Please limit your letters to no more than 275 words, typewritten or clearly printed. Letters or emails citing facts that are not commonly known should include the source. Letters must contain the author's name, address and phone number for verification. All letters will be edited for clarity, grammar, spelling and space. You may email letters to the editor to [editor@mankatofreepress.com](mailto:editor@mankatofreepress.com).

## CIRCLE THE TYPE OF CANDIDATE THAT APPEALS TO YOU MOST...

**BOLD**  
**CENTRIST**  
**MODERATE**  
**LEFT-WING**

**VETERAN**  
**PROGRESSIVE**  
**UNYIELDING**  
**CHARISMATIC**  
**PRACTICAL**



WALT HANDELSMAN  
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2019

## Working on race coverage

It was perhaps telling when a group of all white journalists met with about a dozen people of color, and each took seats on their own side of the room.

Maybe it was a way for each of us to hold on to our comfort zones in what could be an uncomfortable meeting.

The Free Press asked leaders of racial diversity efforts at the YWCA to gather the group so we could hear how people of color feel they are portrayed in The Free Press. The group included a variety of people, from social workers and lawyers to working people and college-educated professionals.

Our job was to listen. And we heard plenty. People of color are portrayed mostly negatively in The Free Press. We show "dangerous black people" in crime stories with no balance showing positive stories for people of color, while white people are portrayed positively in feature stories on a daily basis.

When people comment on stories on our Facebook page, there's a subtle racism running through some threads. People of color are rarely quoted as experts in stories even though many come from a broader perspective of being a person of color living in a mostly white world.

A mugshot of someone convicted of a crime with a short headline can create a racial narrative that is not there. Daily reports of the same type of story can create "racial optics" that again, transfer all too easily to an entire race.

What are the answers?

First, we need to educate ourselves in some ways. We have to acquire

"cultural competency" that gathers more information about a culture before we can write about it. That may mean knowing that Somali refugees run from police because in Somalia, you didn't survive if you didn't run from police.

It might mean knowing a refugee with little English speaking ability didn't know how to secure a car seat for their child.

Because most news organizations employ mostly white people, we need to proactively seek out viewpoints of people of color. We won't absorb that from our environment because even when we go home, our neighbors are 85 percent white.

We have to think about words we use. The term "minority" has less dignity than other words that could be used.

What can be done?

We take seriously the idea of inequity in our coverage and so we met as a newsroom after our meeting with the people of color and came up with some strategies that seem more fair and more proactive about showing the good and bad of all races as equally as possible.

So we'll try to provide context when someone does bad things. If a baby rolls out of a car seat, we'll try to find out from friends, social workers or police if there was a bigger context that involved language and education before we leave a void of facts and allow our readers to assume the worst.

Racist graffiti should be explored and racist words and terms should be fully explained.

We should reconsider some caveats that can be laced with subtle racism.



JOE SPEAR  
Managing Editor

## MPCA report on sediment flawed

I am responding to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's plan on sediment reduction in the July 23 Free Press, and The Free Press editorial on July 28. What is going on?

The picture labeled from MPCA and the Minneopa Falls was neither the falls nor from MPCA. In the editorial "cover crops also enrich the soil with nitrogen." If true, I thought we were trying to reduce nitrogen? Do we need to embellish the problem to address it?

Back to the story, a 50% reduction in sediment going into the river is a worthy goal and something to strive for. Although research shows that most of the sediment is coming from streambanks and they are not being addressed.

MPCA's own sediment reduction strategy from February 2014 states 60-85% of the fine sediment comes from non-fields (i.e. not farms). In the same report "the Le Sueur and Blue Earth rivers, which are only 2 of the 13 watersheds, contribute over half the annual sediment load" with similar farming practices throughout the basins.

MPCA is ignoring its own data. This goal is similar to the goals MPCA had 20 years ago, which was a 40%

reduction in non-point source pollution (i.e. farmers). MPCA's solution then was to leave more residue on the surface. Farmers cooperated and did that, but it didn't reach that goal because again most of the sediment is coming from streambanks. The hope now is putting the residue (i.e. organic matter) in the soil.

Organic matter is good for soil and plants and good for soil health. MPCA is promoting organic matter as the solution saying 1% increases in organic matter (OM) = 1 inch of rain held in the soil. One percent of the top 6 inches of soil = .06 of an inch, or about the thickness of a dime. Let me know how we can squeeze 1" of water into 1/16 of an inch.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) does not agree with this either. This seems to be an example of a case where two government agencies don't communicate with each other. In fact, NRCS states that adding soil organic matter would slightly add to water holding capacity in sandy soils but could even decrease in clay soils which are the main soils found in this area.

Many feel \$3 billion to \$5 billion dollars were wasted in Minnesota over the last 20 years because we were not addressing the problems with viable

solutions. As stated in the article, states are required to develop programs to get certain federal funding. The plans don't have to make sense or be practical or effective. The recent strategy acknowledges the problem is eroding streambanks and ravines but said the solution is "cost prohibitive."

Ag drainage is entirely different than storm water drainage. Consider this for an example: If you filled your sink with 6 inches of water and the drain was sized in a ratio to what tile drainage is to the amount of water in the sink and land area. If it drained in 12 days, as a farmer you would be happy and send your drainage contractor a thank you. If it drained in 3 hours it would be on par with storm sewers, but if it didn't drain in 1 minute, we would probably be calling a plumber.

Farmers should not be blamed for but should be given credit for improving on the harmful effects of mother nature. Farm Bureau and commodity groups should be citing the research that shows farmers are doing a good job instead of being apologetic and accepting the blame for farmers. Less sediment goes down the Mississippi River today than in pre-agricultural times. How about giving science and research a chance to work?

Greg Mikkelsen is a Lake Crystal farmer and is with the Minnesota Natural Resources Coalition.



GREG MIKKELSON  
My View

## YOUR VIEW

### Free Press defended rights to speak

Just a quick note to commend you and your newspaper for your editorial criticizing Rep. Jim Hagedorn for banning from

his office constituents who disagree with his views.

Your editorial helps remind your readers that this country thrives — and per-

haps even survives — only when and if we both speak and act as if we treasure our right to express our views, lawfully and respectfully,

however much we may disagree with one another.

Well done!

Mary Solberg  
St. Peter