

First of all, thank you to Chairman Murphey for inviting me here to address the issue of legislative transparency.

Oklahoma Watchdog is an online investigative news reporting outlet committed to uncovering waste, fraud and corruption at all levels of government in the state. I also tweet from legislative sessions, committee meetings – like this one – and board and commission meetings so that people who can't be at the Capitol for whatever reason can know what's being said.

A little about me: I've been a news reporter for 13-years now including almost three years at KTOK Radio, covering two full legislative sessions and part of a third. I then worked for two years at Oklahomans for Responsible Government as Communications Director before becoming Oklahoma Watchdog editor in January.

It's with that background that I wrote a series of blog posts in May and June on ways to improve legislative transparency and presumably the reason I'm here today talking with you.

Before I talk about improvements that need to be made, I first want to commend House leadership for actions taken last session that greatly improved transparency. There is no doubt that changing the conference committee process so that an actual committee meets rather than passing around a piece of paper for signatures is a huge step towards making the lawmaking process more transparent. Other steps such as putting video of all House Floor sessions online and making them searchable is another great leap forward for taxpayers. Going back a year, having the voting machines in committees and the monitors to show the bill being discussed and the votes is also a wonderful step forward for transparency and accountability. There is no doubt that these changes have moved the House ahead of the Senate when it comes to transparency.

Now that I've praised, it's time to do a little criticizing. I think it's very appropriate that this committee hearing is in this room because 423A is probably the least transparent committee room. There are no cameras here, no outlets accessible to the public to plug in laptops. And, since it's the committee room closest to the office of the Chairman of the Appropriations and budget Committee, it's the room used for pretty much every budget hearing. The fact that these hearings are not recorded and streamed on the web is most unfortunate since it makes it that much harder for people to see how decisions are being made about their tax dollars.

While we're on the subject of tax dollars, the fourth legislative transparency blog post dealt with ways to open up the state budget process. The legislature's main task is passing a budget every year, yet only a handful of elected representatives have a say in how that is done. Instead, the governor and legislative leaders – or their representatives – go behind closed doors and hash out how much is spent where. At the end of that process, a bill comes out and the remaining 140 or so elected legislators vote up or down on it. While various committees do call in agency heads to go over budget requests, those requests themselves are – to put it bluntly – a joke. Last session, knowing that the state was facing a budget shortfall and HAD to cut spending, nearly every agency asked for a budget increase. Higher Ed wanted \$115-million more, Career Tech \$18-million, Health Care Authority \$53-million. DHS staff has already said it is requesting a budget increase of almost \$200-million for next year and admit they know they're not going to get it, but they're asking for it anyway. My idea is to first base the budget solely on the revenue estimate from the Board of Equalization. At the beginning of session, have the A&B Committee decide how to divvy that amount among its subcommittees and then those subcommittees decide how much each agency gets. Any ideas for revenue enhancement, whether fee increases, bonds or

savings, should be in separate bills with the destination of that money already spelled out. That avoids the situation this past session where the general appropriations bill was passed and then bonds had to be approved to fund what had already been passed.

I know that you are going to hear later from Dr. Senat about open Records and open Meetings, but I just want to stress the importance of giving ample notice for meeting times. There was an issue last session when the House A&B Committee chairman said on the House Floor that a meeting would be at 8:30pm and then, with less than an hour's notice, changed that meeting time to 3:30pm. He did apologize for that and said it wouldn't happen again, but having a rule that prevents meeting times from being moved forward without 24-hours' notice would ensure that never happens again.

Finally, I think every bill should be heard and voted on in committee. It was said on the House Floor that committee chairmen are given the power to not hear bills to protect lawmakers, allowing them to tell a constituent that I authored your bill but the chairman wouldn't hear it. I say that you are all elected by the people for your ideas and your ideas should be spoken aloud and voted on by your colleagues. This would not add substantial time to meetings because of frivolous bills since it hardly takes but a minute to say "Do Not Pass" and vote as lawmaker X is explaining his or her frivolous bill. If there is still concern about that, you could further limit the number of bills per lawmaker to six instead of eight. Or, lawmakers could meet five days a week or actually have substantive meetings during Spring Break to add time to the schedule. But for a committee chairman to have sole power over hearing a bill disenfranchises thousands of citizens.

If you STILL think that would be too much of a burden, change the process by which a bill can bypass a committee at the request of lawmakers. It currently requires two-thirds of lawmakers to sign a

petition to hear a bill that a committee chair wouldn't give a hearing. Why is that? If 51 lawmakers think a bill is a good idea, that should be sufficient. After all, the majority is supposed to rule.

My final suggestion deals with vetoes from the Governor. Currently, the governor can veto a bill passed in the last week of session after the session ends and lawmakers can't do anything about it. A quick Google search found that at least four states (Illinois, Louisiana, Hawaii, Kansas) can call special veto sessions to override gubernatorial vetoes of bills passed in the last week or 10 days of the session. I assume it would require a vote of the people, but I think it's a good idea.

With that, I'll take any questions you may have.