

I was a lobbyist for a day

BREAK TIME (WWW.NEWSLEADER.COM/BLOG/BREAK-TIME/)

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Wednesday I took the opportunity to play lobbyist for a day in Richmond with some friends from the Virginia Press Association.

The VPA is concerned about several bills that would take public notices out of newspapers or limit the transparency of government. So I, along with many other publishers and general managers from throughout the state, spent the day speaking with our legislators about those issues.

It was a big learning experience for me. I consider myself fairly familiar with how government works but state government is different. It is efficient. Large blocks of bills that no one is opposed to passes in just seconds. The pace is fast. In a session that lasted just over an hour, the senate considered more bills than the House of Representatives handles in a week or more.

It is also not as formal as one would think. The sub-committee meeting I attended featured legislators sitting around a table, smaller than the one my Grandmother used for Sunday dinner, casually moving through the bills before them. There was little discussion, no grandstanding and no rancor. It was clear that in Richmond, politics and governing are two different things.

I am sure that if I hung around for a few days, I would find the differences and divisions but although the legislature remains starkly divided, everyone is friends in the elevator. Of course, the session is still young.

I paired up with Matt Paxton, the owner of the News-Gazette in Lexington. He had done this before so he knew the drill.

State government has work to do on its transparency but gets an A+ for being open to the people. Anyone can go through a brief security check at the door of the 11-story building and then can go see any legislators they want or attend committee hearings.

We were not the only locals roaming the General Assembly Building halls Wednesday. I ran into Augusta Regional Chamber President Linda Hershey, who had a group of local Chamber members there for Chamber Day. Donna Gum, executive director of the Mental Health Association, was introduced in the Senate gallery for that day's session. It was a busy day with a group of medical professionals circulating in white lab coats and members of the Fraternal Order of Police walking around in full uniform.

Before lunch, Matt and I had seen Senators Creigh Deeds and Emmett Hanger and delegate Ben Cline. The process for seeing someone is very informal. You go to the office, speak to the aid and that person checks to see if the delegate is available. In most cases they were, or the aid told us when we should check back by.

After lunch we saw Delegate Dickie Bell, a sponsor of one of the four public notice bills. His office has a large cardboard cutout of President Ronald Reagan in one corner. I almost asked if I could have my picture taken with it but decided to stick to the mission.

Bell gave us the news we wanted to hear. Instead of continuing to have this debate about public notices year after year, the four public notice bills were all being combined and sent out for a JLARK study to get some firm information about what the future of public notices should be.

That gives the VPA at least a year to solidify support and present the facts about why leaving public notices in newspapers makes the most sense.

That was easy. Mission accomplished. Now, back to being a newspaper publisher.

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