

# Briefings must be open, township boards told

A mayor meets with the city council to announce the city has an anticipated budget surplus of \$1.6 million. But he doesn't let the public know about the meeting.

When a newspaper reporter finds out city officials are gathering behind closed doors to discuss city business, she attends the meeting. City officials tell the reporter to leave before the session starts.

Are these city officials violating the state Open Meetings Act, or do they have the right to get together in a closed session for so-called "staff briefings"?

That question currently is being decided in Ingham County Circuit Court. The Lansing State Journal filed the lawsuit, charging the Lansing City Council violated the Open Meetings Act by failing to notify the public about the meeting.

"I'm sure they (the city council) are going to lose," said Herbert H. Norton, director of township services for the Michigan Townships Association.

"Officials should post (notices of) meetings so no one thinks they're trying to pull anything funny," he added.

NORTON CITED this example during a lecture about the Open Meetings and Free-

dom of Information laws. It was one of several sessions conducted at the annual MTA convention last week in the Hyatt Regency, Dearborn. More than 1,500 township officials — some from as far away as Chipewaga County in the Upper Peninsula — attended.

Norton's contention is backed by a recent state attorney general's opinion. It says that public bodies can't call meetings, conferences or workshops with administrative staffs in order to avoid provisions in the Open Meetings law.

"These presentations of administrators are part of the deliberative process through which decisions on public policies are reached," Atty. Gen. Frank Kelley said.

Norton cautioned township officials not to hold closed sessions "unless it's absolutely necessary."

Closed sessions may be called when a public official or employee who may be dismissed, suspended or disciplined requests a closed hearing, Norton said.

OTHER INSTANCES when closed sessions are allowed under the act include:

- Negotiating collective bargaining agreements.
- Considering purchase or lease of property (up to the time an option to purchase or lease is obtained).

- Consulting with an attorney about trial or settlement strategy in pending litigation, but only when an open meeting would have a detrimental financial effect on the litigation position of the public body.

- Reviewing an application for employment or appointment to a public office when the candidate requests the application remain confidential. However, all interviews by a public body for employment or appointment to a public office must be held in an open meeting.

NORTON WARNED township officials that violation of the act has steep penalties. According to the law, a public official who intentionally violates the act is guilty of misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$1,000.

If the official intentionally violates the law twice, he could be fined up to \$2,000 or serve up to a year in jail.

However, most officials only get a "slap on the wrist for violating the law because they say they didn't know any better," according to Jane Briggs Bunting, an attorney and director of the Journalism department at Oakland University.

"County prosecutors are reluctant to proceed against them (city or township officials) because they've got other things to do," she said.

## outdoors

# Boat, camper shows are here

By Lem Mossee  
outdoors writer

We've had hardly two inches of snow this winter, but already it's time to think spring. The boat and camper shows are coming up this month.

The Greater Michigan Boat and Fishing Show runs from Friday to Feb. 13 in Cobo Hall in downtown Detroit.

"A lot of attendance is controlled by nature, and she dumped on us the last couple of years," said Ray Underwood, executive director of Michigan Boating Industries Association, headquartered in Livonia. With good weather, this year's show should draw 80,000 to 100,000.

General admission is \$4.50; children and senior citizens pay \$2.50.

Underwood says boating pumps \$1 billion or more into the Michigan economy. That figures out to \$1,600 for each of Michigan's

600,000 registered boats, which sounds a bit high unless you credit some folks' total vacation expenditures to boating.

And if you thought boating was losing popularity, think again. According to a Michigan State University study, state boaters logged 16.9 million boat days in 1980, an increase of 23 percent from 1977.

Financing should be better this year. "Historically, the area banks that are into marine lending will have some kind of lower rate for 30-60 days during and following the boat show," Underwood said.

This is the 25th anniversary of the boat show. More than 750 watercraft ranging from nine to 44 feet will be on exhibit — along with accessories and exhibits.

THE CAMPER and Travel Trailer Show opens Feb. 11 in the armory at 15000 W. Eight Mile, Oak Park, and runs 10 days. More than 800 recreation vehicles and related exhibits will be on display, says David

S. Pickering, director of the Michigan Association of Recreational Vehicles and Campgrounds, also headquartered in Livonia.

Admissions are \$3 general, \$2 for kids aged 6-12, and \$1 for senior citizens.

It's a good spot to compare values in RVs, vans, motor homes, travel trailers, pop-up tent campers and truck campers. Other exhibits are on campgrounds and suppliers.

THE OAKLAND County Special Olympics, scheduled for last weekend, has been rescheduled to Saturday, according to the parks and recreation commission. We received notice of the rescheduling too late to slip it into Thursday's edition.

County Park, Sashabaw Road 2 1/2 miles north of I-75, Clarkston. Some 600 mentally impaired persons from age 8 up will take part in cross country ski races, show shoe runs and other contests.

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