

PUGET SOUND Business Journal

Business Leaders Get It.

In business and politics, transparency matters

How many of us believe that government works best for the people when there is transparency? I certainly do, and I bet the majority of Washingtonians do as well.

Right now, difficult decisions are being made daily by employers in our state to keep their companies' doors open, people employed and customers serviced. Meanwhile, our state Legislature is facing equally difficult decisions with our state's \$2.8 billion deficit, yet there appears to be a lack of transparency as they "batten down the hatches" and prepare to levy nearly \$1 billion in new taxes on Washington's families and businesses.

This year's 60-day regular legislative session presented the opportunity for state lawmakers to make some tough decisions in order to get our state back on track in a fiscally responsible way. But that opportunity appears to have been missed.

With more than 1,400 bills introduced this session, private citizens tried their best to "speak" their voice, but there is little evidence that they were heard. Leadership in both the House and Senate operated differently this year — their decisions were made more privately and under the radar.

Perhaps it's because of the difficult budget decisions, as well as the reality that this is an election year. But when a full and fair legislative process is jeopardized by "short-circuiting" public input, it's nearly impossible for anyone to follow what our legislators are doing. The public should say, "This is not OK, seeing and understanding what our leadership is doing, matters!"

The good news is that with the electronic age, it is easy for every Washingtonian to follow the happenings in Olympia. The legislative schedule is available to anybody with access to the internet. Every Wednesday night, committee schedules and notices

GUEST OPINION



Erin
McCallum

are posted for the following week.

However, in this session if there was a subject that interested you and that you wanted to travel to Olympia to express your opinion on, you couldn't rely on the original schedule. During any one day, the committee hearing schedule and agenda saw as many as 50 changes. Even the professionals in Olympia — public affairs officers who are paid to follow the process — had difficulty following what was happening.

Many of our members and private sector citizens drove hours to attend a public hearing to comment, only to learn the bill had been dropped at the last minute. Those who were lucky enough to express their opinion were told that they had 60 seconds to make their case. And that's only after state agency heads, public agency lobbyists and other elected officials got the first shot to express how this bill will hurt their mission or how they need additional funding.

Citizens of Washington deserve better and expect better. Democracy works best when all of us are informed and engaged. Our legislators are obligated to keep the public involved with the decisions they are making. After all, we elected THEM to represent US.

This year is the end of the biennium and is believed by many to be the "calm before the much bigger storm." While our leadership is currently dominated by only one political party, that is not an excuse to back down. Now is the time to demand a transparent decision-making process by the leaders we have elected to do the job.

ERIN McCALLUM is president of two nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations: Enterprise Washington and the Business Institute of Washington.