

The Minnesota Legislature is in full swing with no lack of high-profile issues. How high will the minimum wage be raised? Will the sales taxes enacted on business-to-business transactions be repealed? Should marijuana be legalized for medical purposes? How these are resolved will have an impact on Minnesotans' daily lives.

Minnesotans should add another piece of legislation to their watch list – the “Timberjay bill.” It may not be capturing the headlines, but its significance goes to the heart of government accountability. The bill would clarify that citizens have a right to information about contracts between private businesses and government entities.

The Minnesota Newspaper Association supports this bill on the premise that open government is good government. That's our message during “Sunshine Week: Your Right to Know,” March 16-22.

The legislation is rooted in the legal efforts of the Timberjay, a newspaper that serves Ely and Tower, to get information on a school project. Publisher Marshall Helmberger, concerned about costs and other troubling aspects of a project to build and renovate St. Louis County schools, approached the school district for details about one of the subcontracts with the general contractor.

The district had not obtained a copy of the subcontract. The general contractor, Milwaukee-based Johnson Controls, denied access based on the claim that its subcontract with Duluth-based Architectural Resources Inc. was proprietary. The Timberjay sued and won its case before the Appeals Court, only to have the ruling overturned by the state Supreme Court.

The legislation seeks to clarify the state's Data Practices Act so there's no question that the public has access to details about the performance of contracts between private companies and government entities. Early signals are promising. The bill cleared its first three legislative committees on unanimous votes. Chief authors are Rep. John Lesch, DFL-St. Paul, and Sen. Kari Dziedzic, DFL-Minneapolis.

The casual observer may dismiss the Timberjay dispute as an isolated episode of an aggressive small-town editor challenging a large corporation. Nothing could be farther from reality. Look around any community, and there are numerous examples of private companies doing business with government. The Timberjay wrangle, at its core, epitomizes the everyday efforts of editors and reporters across the state to ensure that public business – in this case, the spending of public dollars – is open to the scrutiny of taxpayers.

Minnesota has some of the strongest laws in the country regarding open government. And the public and the news media must never let down their guard in defending those rights. Advancing the Timberjay bill is a significant step toward ensuring that government operates in a transparent and accountable way.