Sunshine Week

Abuses abound in NH

Today marks the 10th anniversary of Sunshine Week, started by the American Society of Newspaper Editors to promote open government and freedom of information. In New Hampshire, we need this reminder. Too many public officials in the state have trouble remembering that government is to be open, accessible, transparent and subject to citizen criticism and control.

Last week the state House of Representatives tabled — but did not kill — a bill that would allow local governments to charge upfront fees before citizens could see public documents. Under House Bill 646, a municipal employee would be empowered to estimate the time it would take to retrieve public documents, then make you pay him by the hour to go get them.

A simple majority vote in the House could pull the bill back onto the floor for passage, and New Hampshire would be on the way to having its public documents held for ransom by municipal employees.

Meanwhile, Gov. Maggie Hassan is stonewalling media requests for public documents related to her state budget. When The Concord Monitor asked to see department memos detailing budget efficiencies, she said no. She further instructed department heads to forward all requests for those documents to her office, a blatant ploy to evade the right-to-know law.

At the local level, citizens in Gilford and Alton have been arrested in the last year for challenging public officials at public meetings. In Gorham, the police chief sent a letter on official letterhead warning a vocal critic to shut up or face arrest. The law the chief said the man was violating had been found unconstitutional years before.

The week before last, Hudson agreed to pay $37,500 to settle a lawsuit after police cited panhandlers for violating restrictions against panhandling. Those restrictions, according to the lawsuit filed by the New Hampshire Civil Liberties Union, did not exist. In January, Littleton paid $17,500 to settle a lawsuit filed by the NHCLU on behalf of a 72-year-old veteran who was arrested for swearing at a parking enforcement officer.

These are only some of the most recent abuses. We haven't enough space to list all the known ones. Who knows how many have gone unreported?

It just goes to show that even in New Hampshire, where government is small and accountable, abuses of power are routine.

They would be less routine if more people spoke up and more public officials were properly trained on the limits of their power.