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Ex-Blunt aide urges stronger Sunshine Law

Eckersley supports legislation requiring training — and penalties for noncompliance.

By David A. Lieb
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JEFFERSON CITY — A former gubernatorial aide who claimed he was fired after raising concerns about e-mail deletions urged Missouri lawmakers on Tuesday to strengthen the state's open-government laws.

Attorney Scott Eckersley testified in support of legislation that would require public officials to undergo training about the Sunshine Law and raise penalties for those who violate it.

The state agreed to pay \$500,000 last year to settle a lawsuit by Eckersley alleging he was defamed and wrongfully fired in September 2007 after questioning e-mail deletion practices in then-Gov. Matt Blunt's office. Blunt maintained Eckersley was fired for legitimate reasons, and the settlement included no admission of wrongdoing by any parties.

Eckersley, who recently completed a graduate degree program at the University of Southern California, said he showed up to testify before the House General Laws Committee because the Sunshine Law had become important to him.

"I'm in favor of anything certainly that stiffens penalties," Eckersley said. "I'm

also in favor of any educational component for elected officials to undergo."

No committee members asked any questions of Eckersley.

The legislation by Rep. Tim Jones, R-Eureka, would require elected and appointed public officials to complete a training course on their responsibilities under the open-meetings-and-records law.

It also would raise penalties for those who purposely violate the law to up to \$8,000, instead of the current \$5,000 maximum. The penalty for those who knowingly violate the law would be set at a flat \$1,000 — removing a court's current discretion to impose a lower amount.

Among the bill's various other provisions is an expanded requirement for public notice before meetings. Instead of the current 24-hour notice, cities and counties would have to give at least four days notice before meetings on tax and fee increases, eminent domain issues, property zonings or special taxing districts.

The bill also would open to the public more records of the Missouri Ethics Commission, whose duties include deciding complaints against elected offi-

cials for alleged violations of campaign finance laws.

A similar bill passed the House last year but never came to a vote in the Senate.

As it did last year, the Missouri Municipal League opposed the legislation for imposing greater burdens on public officials who may be getting paid little-to-nothing while subjecting them to greater penalties for mistakes in following the law.

"We don't believe this really clarifies the law — it makes it more complicated," said Richard Sheets, interim director of the Missouri Municipal League.

Sponsoring Rep. Tim Jones, who also is the committee chairman, said he wants to keep the bill close to the version that was pending in the Senate last year in hopes of increasing its chances of passage. But Jones wasn't optimistic.

"The bill is like a Whac-a-Mole," Jones said. "Every year, I have an equal number of proponents and opponents to (changing) the Sunshine Law. It seems every time I work out a compromise in one area, something else pops up in another area that is allegedly problematic to someone else."