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## **New Hampshire Press Association supports House Bill 232**

The New Hampshire Press Association supports the passage of House Bill 232 because it enhances the public's right-to-know with regards to the sale and acquisition of property by government bodies.

Under current law, essentially all governmental discussions regarding the "acquisition, sale, or lease of real or personal property" can be indefinitely shielded from public disclosure. This blanket Right-to-Know law exemption erodes the notion of open government and does not serve the public interest.

HB 232 places an important and needed restriction on those secret discussions by limiting their scope to the amount paid, offered or accepted for private property. This is not an onerous or unfair limitation as many communities already adhere to this standard because they recognize the responsibility to be open and honest with the public.

The problem with the current law is that it can be too easily manipulated to block public access to legitimate information regarding the conduct of public officials and the shaping of public policy.

This is not a hypothetical problem, but one with real-life examples and consequences.

At the top of the list, of which you are aware, is the Laconia City Council's 2018 decision to purchase a former Catholic school and a rectory for \$1.14 million without ever letting the public know. And then after the purchase was agreed to, disguising the bond purchase by referring to it "XYZ" in the city budget.

Certainly, such brazen contempt for the people's right-to-know is not in the spirit of the law, but sadly it's within in the letter of the law and that is why this legislation is necessary.

The principal defense of such secrecy is that public disclosure of property purchases might drive up the cost. Perhaps, but this argument ignores the myriad of other consequences resulting from the public purchase of private property, such as effects on the tax base and maintenance costs, which could have much more significant long-term impacts than simply the purchase price.

This is exactly why the public has a compelling interest to be informed when its governing bodies explore the acquisition, sale, or lease of real or personal property. The law now allows government officials to conduct business in ways that are convenient for them or that allow them to pursue policies as if they were the directors of a private corporation and not representatives of the people they serve.

HB 232 is a good step towards ensuring greater government compliance with the public's right to know.

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