

# Our Forum

## Expensive lesson on transparency

The annual observance of Sunshine Week, which continues through Friday, emphasizes local, state and national governments' obligation to be transparent with the citizens they serve.

The Isle of Wight County School Board, unfortunately, gave us a fresh reminder of why Sunshine Week is still needed.

As The Smithfield Times' Nate Delesline III reported in last week's edition, the school division recently paid \$20,000 in legal fees to settle two Freedom of Information Act lawsuits by Isle of Wight resident Kathryne Carter Lemon.

The suits correctly accused the board of providing vague or insufficient details regarding decisions made in closed session and communicating the incorrect start time for board meetings.

Disturbingly, board Chairwoman Jackie Carr, on behalf of other school board members, denied school officials knowingly or willfully violated the law. Ignorance might be an excuse if all school board members didn't receive training on the state's FOIA laws. But they do as part of their initial orientation.

And, as former school board member Herb De Groft points out in a letter elsewhere on this page, Lemon's complaints weren't the first time the board had been taken to task on transparency questions.

Understanding the letter of the law is certainly the school board's obligation. But more important is for elected officials to treat transparency as a value — a bedrock principle of public service. If you make government an open book, fully accessible to the citizens who elected you, the letter of the law will never trip you up and, worse, cost taxpayers \$20,000 that would be better spent educating children.

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## Supervisors made right call on statue

Isle of Wight County supervisors, with their decision last month to remove a Confederate monument from county property, reminded us of the value of our constitutional republic, in which we elect representatives to carefully consider difficult questions and do what they believe to be right for the community they serve.

If the objective were entirely the elusive “will of the people,” we’d need no representatives at all. Governance would be conducted entirely by citizen referendum, which, in the case of the memorial to Confederate dead, would likely have kept it firmly planted in front of the old courthouse.

Isle of Wight’s supervisors, to their credit, considered the good of the entire community and made a decision that was inevitable. Controversy over the monument wasn’t going away, as our nation continues to grapple with questions of race some 150 years after the Civil War and the end of slavery.

“I don’t want any citizen that I represent to be offended, particularly by items that sit on their property,” said Windsor District Supervisor Joel Acree, referring to the monument’s current location on taxpayer-funded, publicly owned land. “Quite honestly, being born and raised here, I have to confess I never paid much attention to the monument, but it’s been interesting during this course. It’s definitely allowed me to reflect on, just, different parts of it.”

Recent changes to state law permit localities like Isle of Wight and Surry to remove, relocate, cover or contextualize any Confederate monuments they own.

Isle of Wight supervisors made the right call, just as neighboring Surry’s supervisors did last year.

The Isle of Wight monument will be preserved, possibly on private property in the southern part of the county. That’s appropriate, with monument supporters able to ensure its preservation in perpetuity.

The people’s property, however, will be free of a symbol that divided our community, and would have continued to do so.

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## Recycling transition badly bungled

We're not naïve about the difficult fiscal climate for governments at all levels, including right here in Smithfield. And as much as we hate it, we understand the logic of the town's recent decision to stop curbside collection of recyclables.

But communication with residents about the decision could not have been handled worse by the town and its recycling contractor, Bay Disposal. And for that, the town has some explaining to do.

As thoroughly documented by reporter Stephen Faleski in last week's edition, the town and Bay Disposal completely flubbed a supposed option for residents to privately pay for recycling pickup once the town's contract with Bay ended this month, provided enough people signed up for the service. The problem is that trying to get your name on the list was a circuitous black hole of Bay telling callers to contact town officials and town officials punting them right back to Bay.

Magically and conveniently, Bay this month declared insufficient interest by town residents in private pickup, despite residents having had no way to express their interest.

On major decisions like ending recycling, the town must do better. And it's not too late to fix this one.

Council members should call a town hall-style meeting, with both socially distanced in-person and virtual participation options, and compel Bay Disposal, which continues to have the town's contact for garbage disposal, to attend and join town officials in answering as many questions as residents want to ask.

Bay should also be required to reopen the sign-up period for residents interested in private recycling pickup, and this time provide convenient, easy ways by phone, internet and traditional mail for people to put their names on the list.

The town also needs to sort out conflicting claims about how much of the recyclables that were being picked up curbside were actually being recycled. The town, in attempting to justify the decision to terminate recycling services, told residents that most of the recyclables were actually being incinerated instead of recycled. Bay said only 30% was being incinerated. Such discrepancies cause distrust among a skeptical citizenry.

Finally, residents deserve a math illustration of the fiscal impact of the decision to end recycling pickup. A letter writer elsewhere on this page makes the detailed case that garbage might actually become a profit center for town coffers. That's unacceptable if he's right. And must be refuted if he's wrong.