Survey: Nevada lawmakers favor government transparency

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – Sixty state lawmakers and legislative candidates who responded to a survey on government transparency largely favor new laws requiring the Legislature to follow the Open Meeting Law and mandating expanded reporting of spending on legislators by lobbyists.

The survey, sponsored by the Nevada Policy Research Institute and the Nevada Press Association, also saw broad support for imposing a 72-hour time frame so the public can read bills before they go to a floor vote, subjecting local government negotiations with public employee unions to the state Open Meeting Law and assessing penalties for government officials who violate Nevada's public records laws.

The survey was sent to 153 candidates and eight state Senators who are not up for re-election this year. Forty-one Republicans, 14 Democrats and five minor party candidates responded.

This survey is intended to give the voters a chance to find out where candidates stand on transparency issues including public records, open meetings and campaign finance reforms.

"I think it ought to be a very important issue for voters," said Barry Smith, executive director of the press association. "That's why we do this; so that they know who has it on their priority list."

Advocates of increased transparency in government say the responses suggest that further progress can be made on the issues in the 2013 session of the Nevada Legislature.

“We’ve been able to move forward with Open Meeting Law, Open Records Law; the campaign finance does show some improvement,” Smith said. “That’s another thing these surveys showed – there is quite a bit of work to do and there is quite a bit of work the Legislature can do.”

Geoffrey Lawrence, deputy policy director at NPRI, said at least 50 of the 60 responses were either in favor of or leaning in favor of the proposals, suggesting there is a good chance for further progress for increased government transparency in the upcoming session.

The new requirements for campaign contribution and expense reports adopted in the 2011 session were part of the 2010 survey, suggesting the effort is having some influence, he said.

“A lot of these other ideas were embodied into bills; they just never passed the Legislature,” Lawrence said. “So hopefully that will happen this time.”

The survey comes just as Republican Assembly caucus leader Pat Hickey, R-Reno, announced several transparency reforms he will seek in the 2013 session. Hickey responded to the survey, indicating support for the various proposals with a “lean yes” on applying the Open Meeting Law to the Legislature. He indicated some flexibility may be required for the proposal, given the 120-day time limit the Legislature has to finish its business.

While most survey responses were supportive without qualification, there were also a few “maybes” and some opposition to the proposals.

Former state Sen. Sheila Leslie, a Democrat who resigned her seat in mid-term to run for the Senate 15 seat now held by Republican Greg Brower, did not favor subjecting collective bargaining negotiations to public scrutiny.

“I don’t think inviting TV cameras into negotiations with public employee unions is in the best interest of government,” she said. “There needs to be more transparency and communication but making everything subject to the Open Meeting Law is not necessarily good government. This is one of those instances.”

Leslie was not alone in expressing concerns about the proposal.

Reno Republican Assembly 31 candidate David Espinosa said: “Negotiations, by their nature, are sensitive matters that an open meeting inclusion would transform into an entrenchment of sides, and an opportunity for grandstanding and demagoguery. I would instead support all efforts to openly disclose the starting positions of both sides of the negotiation, and the final position of each of the representatives of the local government.”

Lawrence said the issue is more problematic for some candidates and elected officials because of the support they get from public sector labor unions, which generally oppose such proposals.

Others are more bipartisan in nature, such as the proposal to require reporting of spending by lobbyists on lawmakers all year round and not just during each legislative session.

Leslie sponsored the bill in 2011 that would have required lobbyists to report all spending on lawmakers, not just spending during a legislative session. Senate Bill 206 passed the Senate unanimously but died in an Assembly committee without a vote.

Smith said the goal is to keep moving forward with incremental successes.

“To me it should be obvious that open government is a bipartisan kind of thing that people can agree on that that’s

what we want," he said. "There's not always agreement on exactly how you get there. But as long as people think it's important and are willing to work on it, then we will move forward with some of these things."