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GUEST COLUMNIST: Follow SC Fiscal Accountability Authority meetings online

Richard Eckstrom Guest Columnist Jan 24, 2019



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Approximately eight years ago, I began a push to make the all-powerful S.C. Budget and Control Board more transparent by streaming its meetings on the internet. (While the streaming of public meetings is routine these days, that wasn't the case in 2010.)

If you're not familiar with the Budget and Control Board, don't worry. It's a safe bet that most folks, including even lots of people within state government, didn't know much about this sprawling state agency. Unique to South Carolina in its scope and structure, the agency with an estimated 1,000 employees had a wide array of functions. They included implementing state budget cuts in times of mid-year revenue shortfalls; overseeing the state's pension and health insurance systems; approving (or denying) state entities' plans for construction projects and for borrowing money; providing office space and telephone, IT and janitorial services for state agencies; granting easements over state-owned property; and giving the final say over major contracts and the buying or selling of state property.

Much of the decision-making was done by a five-member board composed of the governor, the comptroller, the treasurer and the chairs of the House and Senate budget committees. This part-legislative, part-executive branch governing body was sometimes criticized by good-government advocates – me included – who

worried that it blurred the lines between the branches of government and sidestepped any real accountability for the board's actions.

That the Budget and Control Board was little understood was a good reason to videocast its meetings online, I argued. Doing so would promote a better public understanding of state government and let citizens see how important decisions are made. The board agreed to the idea, and I pursued an arrangement with S.C. ETV, which soon began livestreaming the meetings on its website.

In 2014, lawmakers passed a law that dismantled the Budget and Control Board as it stood (though the law fell far short of the kind of reform I and others had hoped for). In its place they created the State Fiscal Accountability Authority, which retained the five-member decision-making board but turned over many administrative functions to a newly created Department of Administration. The legislature also assumed some of the board's previous responsibilities, such as cutting the budget during mid-year revenue shortfalls and making certain decisions related to the retiree pension fund.

But make no mistake: The State Fiscal Accountability Authority still wields considerable control over many aspects of state government. Among other things, its responsibilities encompass:

>> Reviewing and approving major financial transactions (construction projects, vendor contracts, bond issues, and land purchases or sales) by state agencies and public colleges and universities.

>> Overseeing the state Procurement Services Division, the state's central purchasing office for state agencies.

>> Overseeing the state Insurance Reserve Fund, which provides property and liability coverage to more than 1,000 state and local government entities.

>> Reviewing and approving easements and rights of way for public infrastructure.

Today, it's a safe bet that most folks remain unacquainted with the State Fiscal Accountability Authority. That's understandable for a number of reasons, including that busy folks don't have much time to closely follow government. Nonetheless, I plan to put in some effort in the coming year to raise awareness of the authority and its role in state government.

And I encourage those who are so inclined to follow its meetings online. Its 2019 meeting schedule: 9:30 a.m. on Tuesday; 9:30 a.m. on March 5; 9:30 a.m. on May 14; 10 a.m. on June 18; 10 a.m. Aug. 13; 10 a.m. on Oct. 15; and 10 a.m. on Dec.10.

Meetings can be viewed at scetv.org/live/sc-state-fiscal-accountability-authority. (S.C. ETV usually posts a link to the livestreams on the homepage of its website, scetv.org, before each meeting.)

Tune in if you can. More eyes and ears following along will ultimately mean more accountability to you.

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