

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5271

As Passed Senate, March 7, 1997

Title: An act relating to elected officials' guest editorials or columns in newspapers.

Brief Description: Allowing an elected official to prepare and send guest editorials or columns that include arguments for or against ballot propositions if the editorial or column is requested by a newspaper.

Sponsors: Senators Horn, Spanel and Long; by request of Legislative Ethics Board.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Government Operations: 2/11/97, 2/20/97 [DP, DNP].
Passed Senate, 3/7/97, 30-18.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators McCaslin, Chair; Hale, Vice Chair; Anderson, Haugen and Horn.

Minority Report: Do not pass.

Signed by Senators Patterson and Swanson.

Staff: Kathleen Healy (786-7403)

Background: The Ethics in Public Service Act codifies the aim of state officials and their employees to give the highest public service to the citizens of the state. Public responsibilities are to be accomplished with the highest ethical and moral standards, and the business of the state is to be conducted only in a manner which advances the public's interest.

A state officer or employee may not use an agency's facilities to help an election campaign or affect a ballot proposition. Certain activities are specifically excluded.

Summary of Bill: If invited by a newspaper, an elected official may prepare and send a guest editorial dealing with a subject included in a ballot proposition over which subject the official has jurisdiction or authority. The official may argue for or against the proposition without violating the ethics statutes.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: This is a case of trying to unbridle legislators so they can speak to the public on issues. Presently, there is an imbalance between the executive branch and the legislative branch. This allows legislators to do their job and discuss the issues and their positions on same. The Ethics Board found that this would be within the bounds of the ethics statutes. The provision requires that the Legislature must be invited to do the editorial. It does not expand the legislator's ability to use public facilities for wholesale campaigning.

Testimony Against: This bill will open the floodgates. It is not needed. Anyone can be invited to write an editorial.

Testified: Senator Horn, prime sponsor; William Asbury (pro); Paul Telford; Peter Escalante (con).