



## OUR VIEW

### **Open schools' books**

### **Georgians must protect their right to know the names of donors to public colleges, universities**

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During this General Assembly session, as legislators have tried time and again to keep the public in the dark about public business, they've used the same claim: The state needs to roll back the public's right to know in order to be competitive.

That's the excuse the public has heard for several weeks now about House Bill 218, which would extend the cloak of secrecy to the state's economic development office. Because Georgia — unlike some neighboring states — has done the right thing over the years and guaranteed public access to information about the state's efforts to woo new industrial prospects, other states have a leg up on us, proponents of the measure plead. But state officials have been unable to point to one prospect Georgia has lost because of open access to records.

Similarly, the state Board of Regents thinks that Georgia's public colleges and universities may be losing big donors to private schools because they are unable to protect information about their donors from becoming publicly known. The regents are the driving force behind House Bill 340.

Again, no evidence has been offered to show that this fear has ever resulted in the loss of a major donation to the state's public schools. Still, the regents think it's a good idea to keep donor names secret if they are asked.

But it's a very bad idea. Providing secrecy to big donors opens a wide door to undue political influence over everything from who sits on the Board of Regents to which companies get lucrative contracts with the state.

Public institutions are different from private schools. The gifts they generate are gifts to the state, and the public rightfully deserves to know who gave them and how they will be spent.

The state's public university foundations take in more than \$100 million in private sector money each year.

At the University of Georgia alone, at least 148 corporate donors to the UGA Foundation also do business with the school. The university paid the firms more than \$50 million for contracts and services from 2001 through 2003, according to a database of UGA vendors.

That's why organizations such as **the National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy** oppose rollbacks of open records laws for charitable giving for state institutions. The public needs to know where possible conflicts of interest exist and where donors may be exerting unseemly influence.

Moreover, if a donor wants his or her charitable gift to be truly anonymous, there are existing avenues — through attorneys or other intermediaries — to do just that.

Like HB 218, the secrecy provisions of HB 340 are bad public policy. Both measures deserve to die