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Herald-Citizen Editorial

222 Sunshine laws need revamping

The right to know.

It's a fundamental principle that cannot be overstated when it comes to our government. What lawmakers are doing in terms of policy and what they are doing with tax money should always be lit by the sunshine of public scrutiny.

That's why improving the state's "sunshine" laws is so vital.

As they stand, Tennessee's laws are ambiguous and confusing when it comes to openness. A statewide survey recently found more than 100 violations, actual or suspected, of open meetings laws since 2003. Many of the violations were the result of the vagueness of the state's

sunshine laws, which have not been updated since 1974.

What's perhaps worse is that the

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laws are toothless, with no penalties for those who violate the public's right to know.

A ranking of state "sunshine" laws has Tennessee's slated as the 45th weakest in the nation.

To combat these problems, the "Government in Sunshine Improvement Act of 2006" is scheduled to

go before the state legislature this year.

The Act would clarify language, streamline the process for informing the public of government actions and allow courts to impose modest penalties against those who violate the law.

Many state legislators are currently mired in controversy because of ethical lapses, and public confidence in government is ebbing. The Act provides an ideal opportunity for legislators to show the public that they are serious about better serving the public.

Editorials represent the viewpoint of the Herald-Citizen