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Beneath the surface, all is not well in Tallahassee government

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This is a city in which, for the most part, the trains run on time. That is, we have beautiful parks and clean streets; our bus transit system is very modern, with online trip planning and Wi-Fi capability on some routes; and our trash is picked up when it should be.

In other words, the trains run on time.

Citizens rarely worry about much else. Certainly, citizens won't worry about a lack of transparency.

But we should.

Beneath the thin veneer of "all is well" there is a layer that suggests maybe it's not all so well. Maybe there is a problem. Otherwise, why do things in private that belong in the public domain, for example? When there are important issues in our government, shouldn't we hear the discussion? Shouldn't we know the details? Isn't it, after all, our government?

Consider all possible reasons for City Manager Anita Favors Thompson to meet privately with commissioners to tell them she was undoing a vote of the City Commission and giving back a \$1.2 million grant from the federal Broadband Technology Opportunities Program.

Could it be that the FBI has been sniffing around and asking questions about the grant, as have reporters and a few squeaky-wheel citizens? Could it be the less that city staff and commissioners say in public about the circumstances of this grant and why it had to be returned to the federal government, the better for everyone in city government?

Is that really what this is all about?

In fairness, the city put out a press release on its decision to return the grant money – a week later.

In a story by the *Tallahassee Democrat* last week about the decision to return the money without a public discussion or vote, Sunshine Law advocates and other legal experts who do not work for the city government suggested – at best – Favors Thompson acted outside the spirit of the state's open-meeting laws.

"This is an issue of pretty intense public interest and concern," said Barbara Petersen, president of the First Amendment Foundation in Tallahassee. "And the only reason to be taking these decisions behind closed doors is to avoid the public, which is antithetical to the whole purpose and intent of the Sunshine Law."

Joseph W. Little, professor emeritus at the University of Florida's College of Law, seemed to agree.

"I'd be very dubious that a city manager would have the power to in effect cancel the action of the City Commission without the decision being made by the commission itself," he said.

Only City Attorney Jim English, who also works for the City Commission, was among the legal experts in our story thinking that the grant was returned properly.

I certainly do not blame Favors Thompson. She is, in effect, taking one for the team. She made the call; she accepts the responsibility. She protects her bosses on the City Commission, and they are grateful for the cover. The grant gets returned, and citizens are prevented from hearing public discussion or weighing in.

I don't blame them for that, either. Citizens are likely to have a lot of questions. This is the grant, after all, that was to be funneled to an Atlanta nonprofit that was paying our mayor to give it advice, the same group that had tried unsuccessfully many times before to win such grants on its own.

This is clearly an issue the powers-that-be don't want discussed in public. Favors Thompson has declined to speak directly to our reporter on the subject, speaking only through staff. Mayor John Marks is speaking only through his attorney about this.

The question is why did other commissioners allow it to happen this way, and why is the city of Tallahassee becoming one of the least transparent local governments in Florida? What is beneath the veneer of good government that city officials don't want citizens to see?

Think that is an exaggeration?

Remember how quietly the commission gave itself raises and called it deferred compensation?

How about its red-light ticketing plan that turned control of public records over to a private company and has resulted in this newspaper suing the company and the city?

Why has it gone to an encrypted emergency call system that doesn't allow citizens access to information on where traffic tie-ups are?

The list could go on and on, but it would all bring us back to where we started:

This is a city in which, for the most part, the trains run on time. Do citizens really care about much else?

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