

Title: **Governor praised**
Author:
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Governor praised

I'm proud of our governor.
She told everyone to get out
and set up and take precau-
tions.

Title: **Williston 29 trims sign-up window for public input**
 Author: BY MICHAEL SMITH msmith@aikenstandard.com
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Williston 29 trims sign-up window for public input

BY MICHAEL SMITH

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It's become a little easier for members of the public to have their voices heard during school board meetings.

At its September board meeting, Williston Public Schools 29 in Barnwell County voted to trim the notice residents must give before speaking in public participation from three days to one.

The Williston 29 vote comes following a three-month effort by the *Aiken Standard*, which has pressed for the board to conduct meetings with greater transparency.

Under the old policy, the board required three days of notice for citizens to make public remarks.

Anyone missing the window was required to wait until the following month to speak, which deterred public comments since most meetings are announced with only 24 hours of notice.

Jay Bender, a media law expert and attorney for the S.C. Press Association, said there's no law mandating public input policies.

But, he said, allowing the public to speak during public meetings is a cornerstone of open government.

"It is related to the notion that in a democracy, citizens should be able to learn about what public officials are doing in advance of what's being done," Bender said.

Board members adopted the new public participation policy

by unanimous vote at its Sept. 20 board meeting, according to draft meeting minutes.

The board discussed the policy at length at a previous meeting in August. Several board members supported changing the policy then, but tabled the issue until September.

Williston-Elko former principal update

In related matters, Williston 29 still has not released the disciplinary records of former Williston-Elko High School Principal Joel Mitchell.

Mitchell, 33, of Graniteville, resigned in May and was charged in June with first-degree assault and battery related to a complaint of inappropriate contact with a student, according to an arrest warrant.

Mitchell remains free on \$10,000 bond, according to court records.

In June, the *Aiken Standard* filed a Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, request with Williston 29 seeking copies of Mitchell's disciplinary records and personnel evaluations. Williston 29 has refused to release the documents.

In an effort to obtain Mitchell's disciplinary records, the *Aiken Standard* has submitted formal complaints to the Aiken and Barnwell county legislative delegations.

S.C. Sen. Tom Young, R-

Aiken, chairman of the Aiken County delegation, referred the *Aiken Standard's* complaint to the Barnwell delegation since that's where it originated.

In a letter to the newspaper, though, Young said the records should be made public.

"Our legislative delegation is disappointed to hear that the Williston Public School District 29 has not fully responded to the *Aiken Standard's* Freedom of Information Act request," Young's letter said.

"Based upon the information that you have provided, it appears that the school district should make the remaining records available to the paper."

S.C. Rep. Lonnie Hosey, D-Barnwell, chairman of the Barnwell County delegation, said he wanted to review the *Aiken Standard's* complaint before commenting on the issue.

The newspaper provided both delegations with copies of *Burton v. York County Sheriff* (2000), an S.C. Court of Appeals decision that said disciplinary records of public officials are public information when they relate to the performance of their official duties.

The newspaper also provided a copy of a May 2016 veto message by Gov. Nikki Haley, which said teacher evaluations are considered public information that should be made available to the public.

Also provided was a news story about a Sept. 20 ruling by a Circuit Court judge,

which ordered the release of personnel records of two Horry County police officers.

"Defendants are directed to produce complete, unredacted copies of the personnel and training files," of the officers, a copy of the order obtained by the *Aiken Standard* states.

At a Williston 29 meeting in August, the *Aiken Standard* addressed board members in public participation, repeating the newspaper's request for the former principal's records.

A member of the public made a similar request during the Sept. 20 meeting, according to draft minutes from that meeting.

Citing the newspaper's FOIA request, Williston resident Annette Burnette requested the records be released, according to the minutes.

"Mrs. Burnette said that she is aware that the Board's response is based on advice from the Board's attorney, but she asked that the Board either provide the requested information or make public record the legal advice received and publish it in the Board's minutes," the minutes state.

"She told the Board that she just wanted the school's reputation to be open and transparent in the handling of the school's business," the minutes continue.

Michael Smith is the executive editor of the *Aiken Standard* and the *North Augusta Star*. Follow him on Twitter @MichaelSmith064.

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STAFF PHOTO BY MICHAEL SMITH

Williston Public Schools 29 recently changed its public input policy to make it easier to address the school board. However, the district still hasn't released disciplinary records of a former high school principal.

Title: **Family evacuates as hurricane approaches**

Author:

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Family evacuates as hurricane approaches

When Gov. Nikki Haley issued the evacuation order last Tuesday for Charleston, she was about on the third syllable of the word "evacuation" when my wife was on the road.

OK, maybe that's a slight exaggeration. But my wife made it clear to me a while back that, should a hurricane even consider coming to visit, she would not be there to welcome it. Perhaps this is because of her folks living on the Florida coast and having endured several major hurricanes over the years. Perhaps this is because she is no dummy.

Mostly, though, it's because when the remnants of Tropical Storm Julia came over our house, we sat in our den, rain pouring and winds swirling, and said, "Nope. Not doing this if it's bigger than a tropical storm."

I was very much in favor of this plan. She and our son headed on out ahead of much of the traffic, while I stayed back with my daughter to secure the house.

This was a good call for a few reasons. First, our son is not a fan of storms. I blame this on me, as, when he was a toddler, I decided to make a mad dash to our car during a thunderstorm. Hey, here's a fun fact: you know what a transformer getting hit by lightning sound like when it's about 20 feet from you? It sounds like you are about to die. Yay, fun!



MIKE GIBBONS

Mike's Life

So when storms do come a calling, it's not exactly his thing. Plus, as with many tasks in life, streamlining your workforce makes for a more efficient process. You can only bring one patio chair in at a time, so no need for a traffic jam at the sliding glass door.

Also, this was one time I was going to use teenager apathy in my favor. Our daughter is 16, and (mostly) a quite lovely human. That said, she is also a teenage girl and often lets her mood drift into the category best described as "whatever."

But I decided to use this to my benefit. With earbuds firmly entrenched and the soundtrack to "Hamilton" blaring, the approaching storm did not even enter her mind. She just very efficiently and robotically brought chairs and bird feeders and such inside, occasionally stopping to belt out a line from the show.

It only took a few hours to make sure everything was as secure as we could make it. Lots of folks asked me if I planned

on boarding up or taping the windows. Nope. I brought stuff inside, locked up the house, hit the road and hoped for the best.

As I write this, I am still in my evacuee locale a few hours away. Fortunately, neighbors are back and have checked on the area, and there appears to be no damage to our house.

I'm glad that Hurricane Matthew as not as bad as it could have been. But I'm glad we had a good test run of evacuating our house.

We will get back on the road soon and get back to our house and work on the process of moving all of our outdoor stuff back outside. Unless my wife wants to keep bicycles in the living room and deck chairs in the den.

This process will be interesting, as we will have twice the amount of workforce than we did when we were bringing things in. Perhaps a good strategy will be for me to send half of the family out for important errands. And tell my daughter she can listen to "Hamilton" while she helps me get our house back in order.

Mike Gibbons was born and raised in Aiken. A graduate of the University of Alabama, he now lives in Mt. Pleasant. Email him at scmgibbons@gmail.com or follow him on Twitter @StandardMike.

Title: **Williston board solves public input paradox**
 Author:
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EDITORIAL

Williston board solves public input paradox

After months of pressing by the *Aiken Standard*, we're happy to report that public access to the business of Williston Public Schools 29 has taken a positive step forward.

At its September monthly board meeting, school board members voted unanimously to reduce the cutoff time to speak in public participation – also known as public input – from three days to one.

This was a critical step in ensuring openness and transparency. Not only was the three-day threshold a restrictive policy in its own right, but it also made it virtually impossible for the public to participate in the board's business.

Williston 29 often provides notice of its meetings one to two days ahead of time, in compliance with the law, which requires 24 hours notice. But with the cutoff for public input previously set three days out, taxpayers had no chance of addressing the board's business until a month later.

During the summer, we minted the phrase "public input paradox" to describe the board's old way of doing things. The board's policy troubled us so much that the *Aiken Standard* took the unusual step of signing up for public participation to air our concerns in person.

We did this at the Williston 29 board's August meeting. We tried to address the board in July concerning other public information matters, but were shut out due to the three-day rule. The Williston 29 board was wise

to revamp its public participation policy. Now the public doesn't have to wait a month to discuss the board's business. For this, the Williston 29 board, and Superintendent Dr. Missoura Ashe, are to be commended.

However, we are still discouraged that Williston 29 won't release the disciplinary records of former Williston-Elko High School Principal Joel Mitchell.

Mitchell, of Graniteville, resigned from the district in May and in June he was charged with first degree assault and battery. An arrest warrant said the charge involves a complaint relating to inappropriate contact with a student. The case clearly is of public interest. By refusing to release the records, Williston 29 is not following the law. During the past several weeks, we've outlined several past precedents supporting the release of disciplinary records of public officials. Readers may recall the S.C. Court of Appeals ruled in *Burton v. York County Sheriff* (2000) that disciplinary records of public officials are subject to the S.C. Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA. Gov. Nikki Haley affirmed this in May 2016, when she vetoed a bill that would've restricted the release of teacher evaluations.

Since then, further developments support the release of disciplinary records.

On Sept. 20, an Horry County Circuit Court judge ordered the release of personnel and training records of two police officers.

"Defendants are directed to produce com-

plete, unredacted copies of the personnel and training files," of the officers, the order states.

The school district's stubborn refusal to release documents that are clearly public prompted the *Aiken Standard* to take the unfortunate step of reaching out to the Aiken County and Barnwell County legislative delegations. It's unfortunate only because such steps shouldn't be necessary when the law is crystal clear.

Sen. Tom Young, R-Aiken, deferred our complaint to the Barnwell County delegation, which is understandable since that's where our complaint originated. But Young offered comforting words in a response letter.

"Based upon the information that you have provided, it appears that the school district should make the remaining records available to the paper," the letter states.

As of press time we were still waiting for a response from Rep. Lonnie Hosey, D-Barnwell, chairman of the Barnwell County delegation, though we hope when we receive it, he'll reach the same conclusion. The records are public.

Meantime, the *Aiken Standard* will continue its pursuit of the personnel evaluations. They're public records that taxpayers must be allowed to see. And in a broader sense, we want readers to know the *Aiken Standard* will relentlessly press government agencies to operate with greater transparency when we think that's not occurring. If you paid for the public records, then you have a constitutional right to see them.