Kasich veto needed to help journalists do their jobs

By Dennis Hetzel

There are times when it is necessary and in the public’s best interest for journalists to ask if someone has a concealed carry permit.

For example, in the case of a shooting, a reporter might ask these questions: Did the shooter have a concealed carry permit? If so, was it proper and legal? And, if it wasn’t issued appropriately, why was the permit not revoked as the law requires? These are the kinds of questions good reporters ask – and may no longer be possible to ask under Ohio law.

That is why the Ohio Newspaper Association, joined by the Ohio Association of Broadcasters and the Ohio Association of Chiefs of Police, believe it was wrong for the state legislature to throw the secrecy shroud over another government activity by eliminating the limited access to this information. It is why the ONA urges Gov. Kasich to use his line-item veto power to restore the current language in the law.

The provision is in the massive budget bill, House Bill 64, headed to the governor’s desk. (You might wonder why such a provision was tossed into the budget bill late in the game, but that’s a subject for another day.)

To explain how we got here, it’s important to debunk myths about this information. Ohio sharply limits the access of journalists to this information already. Reporters can’t take notes or copy the permits; nor do they see specific street addresses. This prevents media outlets from publishing or posting long lists of permit holders – an initiative by a few media outlets that sparked controversy around the country.

Efforts to block even that limited access flared in 2011 after the Middletown Journal published a story in which a reporter checked to see if local elected official had carry permits. This article has been used as “evidence” that the media simply seeks to sensationalize and invade the privacy of legal gun owners.

I urge the people with concerns to actually read the story. It’s legitimate by any standard of good journalism. It couldn’t have been more “fair and balanced.”

The story came at a time when there was a debate in the wake of the shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords in Arizona about elected officials being able to arm and protect themselves in public settings. Several state legislators were interviewed -- and even posed for a photo at a shooting range. Local officials who had permits were interviewed on the record.

The story also contained what has to be one of the most memorable quotes of 2011 from Rep. Ron Maag, who said, “The reason I carry a gun is because I can’t carry a cop.”

Such stories no longer will be possible in Ohio if this language stands. Nor will these:

The Indianapolis Star found 450 felons in 2009 who were improperly issued gun permits. The reporter for the story later remarked that he was pleasantly surprised by the reaction of many gun owners to his stories. Instead of responding to the problem the newspaper exposed, the Indiana Legislature blocked access. In 2011, The New York Times found that roughly 10 percent of concealed-carry licensees in North Carolina had criminal convictions, and local authorities had failed to revoke the permits as they should have in about half the cases. In Tennessee, some permits reportedly were given out as political favors and not based on qualifications.

Maintaining the current language also is consistent with our open records law, which says public records should be open unless there is a compelling reason to close them. While perhaps understandable, vague fears about something bad that might happen if this information is available aren’t supported by any evidence. Indeed, the opposite can be argued – If I know you have a permit, I am less likely to want to confront you in person or in your home.

Should the legislature’s action become law, here’s the result: County sheriffs will maintain secret files of permit holders – or revoked permit holders -- available only to government officials with no transparency or meaningful outside scrutiny of how the program is functioning.

Supporters of both the First and Second Amendments share concerns about excessive government secrecy. Let’s agree that journalists can’t do their jobs without access to information.

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