

Government Oversight Committee
(Joint Legislative Committee on Program Evaluation
and Government Accountability)

Meeting Summary
March 14, 2005

CALL TO ORDER

The Co-chair, Sen. Gagnon, called the meeting to order at approximately 4:15 p.m. in the Labor Committee Room.

ROLL CALL

Sen. Gagnon declared a quorum present and dispensed with Roll Call.

SUMMARY OF MARCH 7th MEETING

The Committee did not request any changes. Director Ashcroft noted that she had asked Linda Pistner of the Attorney General's office to review those portions of the Summary applicable to her. Consequently, Ms. Pistner may suggest some changes that the Director will incorporate as appropriate.

REPORT FROM OPEGA DIRECTOR

Director Ashcroft briefed the Committee on the status of the Office start up activities. In regards to the open positions, she reported that she expected to make an offer on the Administrative Secretary position this week. She also reported that she was in process of making decisions on who to interview for the Principal Analyst position. She reminded the Committee that she would be meeting with John Turcotte of TPACT Consulting this week to review his suggestions on the top candidates for that position.

In regards to office space, Director Ashcroft told the Committee that the contractor was making progress on Room 107. She is anticipating that furniture would be getting moved in next week and that she would be moving into her office the week after that.

Director Ashcroft also reported that she had begun designing the elements of the Evaluation Universe database.

OLD BUSINESS

There was no old business to address.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Rep. Crosthwaite reminded the Committee that LD 245, which provides for OPEGA to establish an immediate review system, was scheduled for public hearing with the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government at 9:00 am on Friday, March 18th.

Discussion ensued among the Committee as to whether the Committee already had the authority, within the current language of the OPEGA statute, to direct OPEGA to perform the type of review called for in LD 245. Generally the Committee was of the opinion that the current statute already provided sufficient authority, but that the clarification which would be provided by LD 245 would strengthen that position.

Sen. Gagnon raised the concern that seeking an amendment to the OPEGA statute this soon might rekindle the political debate that had already delayed getting OPEGA established. Sen. Raye said he believed there was currently strong bipartisan support for OPEGA and did not think there would be difficulty in passing LD 245.

It was decided that the Director would inquire of the Attorney General's office as to what was already provided for within the current language, without adding LD 245, and report the AG's response to the Committee by email. Rep. Crosthwaite indicated that he would proceed with LD 245 while remaining sensitive to possible political circumstances that might suggest that LD 245 should be withdrawn.

NEW BUSINESS

The Committee reviewed the "To Do" list prepared by the Director for the purposes of determining what the Committee's next actions should be.

Rep. Canavan mentioned she still had concerns about information provided by Ms. Pistner at the last meeting regarding the extent to which Federal laws protecting the confidentiality of certain documents might frustrate OPEGA's efforts. Rep. Dugay noted that Ms. Pistner was expected to return with a briefing paper for the Committee and that perhaps there could be further discussion about this at that time. The Committee also requested that the Director ask Attorney General Rowe to be present at that meeting.

The Director reminded the Committee that "degree of legislative interest" was one of the criteria to be used in selecting and prioritizing areas to be evaluated. She suggested that the Committee decide upon the means by which "legislative interest" would be determined such that legislative input could be factored into the upcoming selection process.

Discussion ensued among the Committee as to various methods of seeking input from the legislature as a whole. As a result of this discussion, the Committee requested that the Director draft a survey that could be sent to all legislators. The Committee expressed the desire to review the draft and to discuss the survey further at the next meeting. The Committee also requested that the Director prepare a letter to be signed by the Chairs and distributed to all legislators in advance of the survey. The purpose of the letter being inform the other legislators about the Committee's efforts to date and to let them know the survey would be coming.

The Director committed to providing the letter to the Chairs by Monday, March 21st and committed to providing all members of the Committee a draft of the survey no later than Friday, March 25th.

Sen. Gagnon suggested that the Chairs, Minority Leads and other interested Committee members hold an informal “press availability” session with media representatives for the purpose of getting word to the public about what the Committee has been working on. The Committee agreed this would be a good idea.

Discussion ensued among the Committee as to whether a meeting with the press should include providing information as to how the public could give suggestions on what OPEGA should evaluate. The Committee agreed it should be prepared to address this question if it came up but should not offer the information as part of the initial presentation to the press. The Committee also agreed that there was more work to be done in establishing some sort of formal avenue for public input. Consequently, the Committee felt that the best avenue for interested members of the public at this time would be through their respective legislators with the legislators then funneling that input to the Committee. While the Committee wants to provide an avenue for the public, it also seeks to avoid having the Director of OPEGA inundated with phone calls and emails.

SCHEDULE NEXT COMMITTEE MEETING

The next Committee meeting is scheduled for Monday, March 28, 2005 at 4:00 pm in the Labor Committee Room.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 5:17 p.m.