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Bill calls for greater oversight of local development corporations

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ALBANY— A Rochester-area state senator wants to bolster the accountability of the shadowy local development corporations that are increasingly used by municipalities to oversee public services.

Sen. James Alesi, R-Perinton, Monroe County, proposed legislation this week that would increase access to documents of local development corporations under state Freedom of Information laws.

Local development corporations are formed essentially take some government functions off the government's books. Yet while the corporations perform government duties, they are not subject to the same open-government laws and are operated privately, even though the boards that oversee them are typically appointed by local governments.

A recent report by the Rochester-based Center for Governmental Research found at least 16 local development corporations in the Rochester area and said the corporations need more public oversight.

Alesi said current freedom-of-information laws are ambiguous when it comes to the development corporations. In some cases, the corporations do not have to comply with the open-meeting laws, he said.

"Rather than have an open question or an open debate, it should be very clear and be in statute, instead of in regulation," he said. "Let's just clarify it, make it a law, put in statute so everybody knows they have to play by rules."

Senators William Larkin, R-New Windsor, Orange County; Thomas Morahan, R-New City, Rockland County; and Stephen Saland, R-Poughkeepsie, are co-sponsors of the measure. Yet Alesi is still seeking support in the Democratic-controlled Assembly.

Alan Richards, spokesman for Assemblywoman Susan John, D-Rochester, said, "she is looking at the bill."


Still, Alesi said the corporations need added transparency because they are able to acquire public property from local governments and are not always required to compete for contracts with other developers.

The corporations are also free to award contracts at will, which potentially allows local government officials, who often appoint LDC board members, to reward friends and political allies with these contracts, he said.

Robert Freeman, executive director of the Committee on Open Government, said local development corporations are generally covered under the freedom-of-information laws, but the measure would "focus of attention on these authorities that are in so many instances overlooked."

The bill would also add a new condition that would require local development corporations to keep annual records that the public can access, Freeman said.

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