

February 5, 2009

TESTIMONY ON HB 137
(Home Financial Accountability Act of 2009)

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Dear Chairman McIntosh and Members of the Environmental Matters Committee:

I am president of the Alliance for a Better Columbia (ABC), a community-wide citizens activist group in Columbia. Today, I am pleased to offer my support of HB-137, with two amendments.

For many years, ABC has been waging an uphill battle with the Columbia Association (CA), the homeowners association that governs Columbia, for greater transparency and accountability in how it conducts its affairs. Most recently, ABC has encountered problems with accessing CA records pertaining to bonuses, the use of company-owned vehicles, and statistical information of a non-confidential nature pertaining to the disposition of employee-management disputes. CA has justified its stonewalling with general references to “significant costs” involved in data retrieval without even attempting to itemize (e.g., programming time) or quantify these costs. They have only released employee compensation data that is available in the 1099 IRS Form, which does not distinguish between salary and bonuses and pertains only to the top management of the organization.

In addition, I was once told it would cost \$400 to \$500 to have a staff member supervise me as I reviewed some general residential property assessment data. In addition, I would have to pay a \$.50 per page copying charge. This charge is totally unreasonable, given the availability of commercial copying services (e.g., Kinko) that charge \$.05 to \$.06 per page. ABC therefore suggests that the fee charged by the State Courts, which amounts to the same as the CA charge, is not an appropriate benchmark for HB 137. We believe that it would be more appropriate to peg it to the fee charged by the State Dept. of Budget and Management, which is \$.15.

ABC would like to recommend one other amendment. We see no reason to exempt employees earning less than \$50,000 per year from the requirement for public inspection. This exemption is arbitrary and should be eliminated.

In conclusion, ABC believes HB 137 would go a long way toward opening up CA to public scrutiny, although there is still room for further improvement.

