

March 31, 2009

TESTIMONY ON HB 137
(SUPPORT WITH AMENDMENTS)

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Dear Chairman Frosh and Members of the Senate Judiciary Proceedings 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 our support of HB-137 with 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. I was recently informed by CA's President that it would cost \$1,200 to obtain information pertaining to the use of company-owned vehicles by CA staff for personal (non-business) reasons. Requested data included annual mileage and associated costs for 12 take-home vehicles. I wasn't provided any rationale for this seemingly excessive charge other than that the data would need to be retrieved manually from multiple sources.

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 is pleased that the House Environmental Affairs Committee accepted its recommendation to amend the bill so as to prevent copying charges in excess of the local prevailing commercial charge. ABC is also pleased that this committee accepted its recommendation not 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.