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Public loses if board dies

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Question: What kind of lunatic would run an \$18.8 billion-a-year corporation with virtually no planning, no goals and no way to measure success?

Answer: Your North Carolina state government.

The way state government operates would make the hair stand up on the back of the necks of executives at SAS, IBM or GlaxoSmithKline. Decisions that drive state government are often made by the seat of the pants.

Former Texas oilman Walter Davis whispers in Senate leader Marc Basnight's ear. Basnight likes the idea. Poof. We have a \$3.1 billion higher education bond referendum, the largest of its type in American history.

Spending priorities are often decided in back-room negotiations, or in campaign back shops on the basis of polling data.

State government, of course, is not a business. The political process is messy -- always has been, always will be.

But that doesn't mean there can't be some modest effort to plan and evaluate how the business of state government is doing.

In fact, one already exists. It's called the North Carolina Progress Board, and it was launched by Gov. Jim Hunt in 1995. The board was part of a national movement to make government more accountable.

The idea is simple. Provide state residents with accessible information on how things were going in education, roads, taxes, mental health, parks, you name it. Provide data showing how states compare with one another. Show where the state is progressing and where it is falling behind. Issue report cards.

Politicians hate it. Too much information. Too easy to be used against them in political campaigns. Better to keep the public in the dark.

As a result, the Progress Board has become a political orphan. Its annual budget has been cut from \$450,000 to \$228,000.

Mack Pearsall, an Asheville car dealer and a member of one of North Carolina's most prominent and civic-minded families, has been spearheading an effort to save the board.

"I've been personally giving my funds to keep the dadgum thing alive," said Pearsall, a board member. "We've done what we think is extraordinary work with \$228,000, but we are at a crossroads. What we are suggesting to the North Carolina leadership is if you find this information valuable and you find the format we are presenting it in usable, it is time for validation."

The Progress Board has a plan for becoming a public/private entity. It would keep the information updated online. It would provide regional breakdowns. The information could be used by governors, legislators, political candidates, county commissioners, the United Way, nonprofit foundations and even corporations.

The Progress Board wants \$600,000 in state funding, which it would supplement with money raised privately.

But the prospects are poor.

Neither Gov. Mike Easley's budget proposal nor the Senate budget plan passed last week includes additional money for the Progress Board.

Unless something is done, the Progress Board might soon be history. If so, the politicians win, and the public loses.

As Pete Peterson, Nixon's commerce secretary, once put it, "Public policy is too important to be left solely to the politicians."

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