

reviewjournal.com

 **PRINT THIS**

Powered by  **Limelight**
NETWORKS

Nevada ranks low in study on transparency of state government

BY ED VOGEL

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL CAPITAL BUREAU

Posted: Mar. 19, 2012 | 2:58 p.m.

Updated: Mar. 20, 2012 | 8:21 a.m.

CARSON CITY -- It's hardly a surprise that Nevada scored a D minus grade and ranked 42nd among the states in a study of the transparency of state governments.

The study, released Monday by the Center for Public Integrity, Global Integrity and Public Radio International, found the same ethical lapses that Nevada media and public interest groups have pointed out for years.

"State officials make lofty promises when it comes to ethics in government. They tout the transparency of legislative processes, accessibility of records, and the openness of public meetings. But these efforts often fall short of providing any real transparency or legitimate hope of rooting out corruption," the study's overview said.

Legislators themselves are well-aware of the problems but have not taken steps to correct them, the overview said.

Among the criticisms:

- Lobbyists can spend money on Nevada legislators year-round but only have to report their expenditures on them during the four-month legislative session every other year. An attempt by former Sen. Sheila Leslie, D-Reno, to require year-round accounting by lobbyists passed the Senate in 2011, but failed to get out of an Assembly committee.
- The Nevada Legislature has exempted itself from the open meeting law, an exemption that means the decisions on the state budget and tax increases are made behind closed doors in end-of-the-session deals.
- There is no limit on the gifts legislators and other top officials receive. They only have to report gifts of more than \$200. Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto, Lt. Gov. Brian Krolicki and Secretary of State Ross Miller all accepted more than \$13,500 in gifts in 2011. They took tickets to concerts, sporting events, airline flights and hotel rooms. Gov. Brian Sandoval gave a \$500 National Finals Rodeo jacket he received to charity.

Mary-Sarah Kinner, Sandoval's spokeswoman, said the governor will review the information in the report as he prepares his legislative agenda.

He also plans to speak about the findings with the Nevada Ethics Commission, the attorney general and members of the Legislature, she said.

Assembly Pat Hickey, chairman of the Assembly

Republican Caucus, didn't offer any criticism of the report but said, "I think Nevada voters themselves need to grade legislators, and they are invited to do that every two years."

Sen. Mo Denis, D-Las Vegas, called the study "incredibly disturbing, but hopefully some good will come of it and force new reform measures to be implemented as quickly as possible."

"Citizens deserve an accountable and transparent government, and we will continue to work to make that happen," said Denis, the caucus leader for Senate Democrats.

The report on Nevada, prepared by former Las Vegas Review-Journal reporter Joan Whitely, gives Nevada an F for its state pension fund management and a D for redistricting congressional and legislative districts.

Nevada is \$10 billion to \$40 billion short of the funds it will need to cover expected costs of public employee pensions.

And last year, the Legislature and Sandoval failed to reach any agreement on redistricting, so they let it be decided by District Judge James T. Russell of Carson City and a three-member panel he appointed. Citizens had scant input into the decisions.

During the 2011 session, Nevada legislators and the governor repeatedly hyped their efforts to bring more transparency to government, mainly by posting budget documents online. Nevadans could follow along online as witnesses presented information during hearings on bills.

That information, however, is not available during interim committee hearings.

The study did not award any states an A grade. New Jersey, Connecticut, Washington, California and Nebraska received B scores. Eight states got Fs.

The Associated Press contributed to this report. Contact Review-Journal Capital Bureau Chief Ed Vogel at evogel@reviewjournal.com or 775-687-3901.

Find this article at:

<http://www.lvrj.com/news/nevada-ranks-low-in-study-on-transparency-of-state-government-143394896.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright © Stephen Media, LLC. All rights reserved. Any reproduction or distribution (except for personal, non-commercial purposes), in any form or by any means, without the express written consent of Stephens Media, LLC, is strictly prohibited.