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Open and effective

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A request by some local road service area commissioners for greater leeway under the state open meetings law seems worthy of consideration. Newspapers usually opine in favor of greater openness in government and tighter rules to make it happen. Strict application of the current law, though, causes nearly impossible problems for the small, volunteer commissions that keep many of our borough roads passable.

Wet summers, such as the one just concluding, can make a mess of the roads, especially those with gravel surfaces. Potholes are unavoidable. Washouts and soft spots are common.

Some of these problems must be fixed rapidly to avoid accidents and damage to vehicles.

Legally, commissioners must discuss and make decisions at quarterly meetings that are open to the public and announced in advance. That's reasonable and advisable.

However, Mother Nature doesn't play by the same rules. Rain clouds don't advertise in the newspaper.

Those clouds can cause damage that requires immediate work. That work may be too expensive to fit within the agreed-upon plan. Commissioners cannot legally talk with each other to reach a consensus about what to do in such situations, though, without holding a public meeting.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough's guidelines for service area commissioners explain the rules: If you need to speak to each other, you have enough business for a public meeting. To discuss work and make decisions about what will be done in the service area outside of a public meeting is a violation of the Open Meetings Act.

Perhaps the problem could be solved by giving the commissions authority to delegate some actions. If not, the law may need some tweaking, because the current situation obviously doesn't provide the kind of flexibility that road service commissions need to do their jobs.

The revisions should be limited in scope, though. Not all road service areas are informal little neighborhood operations. Some spend large amounts of money. For those reasons, their actions should be not only effective but open to public scrutiny.