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Open-government bill advances

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - A bill requiring that additional exemptions to open-government laws be spelled out precisely in new legislation won approval Thursday from a Senate committee.

Supporters said those who want to narrow the Freedom of Information Act often insert vague language in complex bills to conceal efforts to scale back the open-government law.

Under the bill approved by voice vote in the Senate Judiciary Committee, lawmakers would have to specifically refer to the FOIA when they are trying to add exemptions to a bill.

They would have to make clear that they are seeking an exception and what they are trying to make off limits.

"If Congress is to establish a new exemption to FOIA, it should do so in the open and in the light of day," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas.

Supporters of the law said it is difficult now to know when someone is pushing new exemptions because they often are in long and complicated bills, and the provisions are not clear until after passage.

"In recent years, we have seen more of these types of exemptions tucked in legislation, and while some are appropriate, every single one deserves scrutiny," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

The Associated Press, media groups and other FOIA supporters have urged Congress to strengthen the open-government law.

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