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Poor decision to ax research center

Beshear should shine veto light on it

Opinion - Editorial

We've yet to hear anyone explain why it's a good idea for the legislature to ax the Long-term Policy Research Center.

More has been heard from people who think it's a bad idea, such as Reps. Reginald Meeks, D-Louisville, and Adam Koenig, R-Erlanger, members of the center's board.

The House last week went along with a Senate plan to suspend the center's funding in the 2010-12 budget.

Afterwards, Meeks said it had become clear that some "key individuals have had issues with the center, not because of the work product" but because the "center is not under the control of anyone and is independent."

That independence is precisely what makes the non-partisan think tank a powerful asset.

Lawmakers can, and sometimes do, squelch research by legislative staff if the findings challenge their views.

By contrast, the center answers to a 21-member bipartisan board made up of people inside and outside government.

The center's creation in 1992 was hailed as a sign of the legislature's maturing into a co-equal branch of government, capable of strategic decisions based on objective research and long-term trends, rather than taking orders from the governor or reacting to the political pressure of the moment.

Today's legislative leaders of both parties apparently are more interested in maintaining total control of their domain than hearing independent analysis.

That's sad because the challenges facing Kentucky are not getting less complicated.

Appropriately enough, the decision to ax the center's funding of about \$500,000 a year was made without a cost-benefit analysis or much public discussion.

Even if there had been such an effort, it's hard to quantify all the ripple effects of knowledge.

Far from Frankfort, for example, in the coal-mining town of Inez, Kevin Smith, 26, read the center's Visioning Kentucky report and was inspired to start Young Professionals of Eastern Kentucky to help attract and keep bright young people in the region.

In its very first study, the center predicted a drastic decrease in federal tobacco quotas. That was an incendiary topic that no politician wanted to touch at the time.

Congress subsequently eliminated tobacco quotas altogether. That first report was the beginning of a string of good heads-ups from the center.

In recent years, the legislature has spent a lot of money expanding and remodeling its offices and has hired more staff to work directly for legislative leaders.

The Long-term Policy Research Center costs taxpayers about 1 percent of the almost \$105 million that the legislature plans to spend on itself over the next biennium.

As the ultimate steward of the public's money, Gov. Steve Beshear should exercise his line-item veto.

Even if the legislature overrides him, a veto would at least shine more light on a questionable decision.

To sample the Kentucky Long-term Policy Research Center's work go to www.kltprc.net