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Schaefer is again letting state's spokesmen speak

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ANNAPOLIS — It was all just a big misunderstanding, Gov. William Donald Schaefer said yesterday as he untied the gag he had placed on state government spokesmen four weeks ago.

"A big to-do about nothing," the governor declared, admitting he has been irritated by newspaper and broadcast stories about the gag order and editorials criticizing it.

It's not what he meant at all.

He just wanted state agencies to coordinate what they say to the press and the public.

He just wanted the teeniest bit of notice before some reporter asked him a question about something he otherwise would know nothing about.

He just wanted people to remember that *he* is the governor, that *he* is the one who sets the policy.

"It was not meant as it was interpreted," he said at a press conference. "If I can be misinterpreted, I am."

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GOVERNOR SCHAEFER
After untying the gag

Henceforth, Mr. Schaefer said yesterday, spokesmen for state agencies may answer press queries — as long as the inquiries are not part of personal "vendettas" — without getting approval from his office.

But he does want to be notified after the fact.

Since a Cabinet meeting July 2, most state agencies have been following orders to obtain clearance from the governor's press office, or even from Mr. Schaefer personally, before answering even the simplest questions from the media or from state legislators. Some Cabinet sec-

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retaries prohibited their employees from appearing before legislative committees to explain administration policy.

Waiting for clearance

Spokesmen who had routinely handled inquiries within hours suddenly found themselves waiting five to seven days for clearance to answer routine questions.

As a result, reporters were unable to get basic information about such prosaic topics as subway construction, lifeguard contest winners, mosquito infestation, prison demolition and rabid dogs.

High-ranking Transportation Department officials even hesitated to give interviews to the media or to repeat comments they had just made in a public forum for fear they might lose their jobs.

Some officials felt so gagged that they wouldn't comment even when asked if there was a gag order.

A sad little joke

In some quarters, it all became a sad little joke, with state employees who are paid to be "public information officers" asking, tongue-in-cheek, "How can I not help you today?"

Mr. Schaefer said he still wants all news releases cleared through his press office before they are released.

"I'm just saying, 'If you've got a press release, would you be so kind as to tell me what it is about before you hand it to the press.' I don't think that's unreasonable," the governor said.

Mr. Schaefer also, for the third time in three months, has sent a memo that warns members of his Cabinet and top staff not to seek opinions from the attorney general's office or to make unilateral decisions on legal matters without consulting Daryl C. Plevy, a lawyer on his executive staff.

Again, Ms. Plevy said, the idea is to coordinate the administration's overall policy.

"My problem is that everyone could do anything they wanted without coordination," Mr. Schaefer complained, attempting to explain what prompted the clampdown.

Coordination and advance notice was all he wanted, he insisted.