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House OKs bill to restrict access to concealed-carry records

By Michael Sluss

The House of Delegates passed legislation today that would allow information about Virginians with permits to carry concealed handguns to be kept off limits to the public.

House Bill 982, sponsored by Del. Dave Nutter, R-Christiansburg, was originally intended to exempt a state police database of permit-holders from the Virginia Freedom of Information Act. The bill was amended Thursday to allow circuit court clerks to deny public access to the information, and prohibit them from releasing anything more than the names of people who are granted permits.

The bill passed the House by a vote of 97-1 and now heads to the Senate.

Nutter filed the bill in response to a controversy sparked last year by The Roanoke Times, which posted a state police database of concealed carry permit holders on its Web site and published an editorial writer's column encouraging readers to access the list. Widespread complaints prompted the newspaper to remove the data from its site.

Attorney General Bob McDonnell later advised the state police to stop making the list available. Nutter's bill was designed to make the ban permanent. But the amended bill would broaden restrictions by requiring circuit court clerks to withhold "identifying personal information" such as addresses, phone numbers and Social Security numbers. Clerks would have the discretion to release the names of people receiving permits. The Senate postponed action on a similar bill (Senate Bill 529) today.