

By 383 to 8, House Votes Bill to Strengthen Public's Access to Government Information and Records

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WASHINGTON, March 14 —

Despite opposition from the Nixon Administration, the House passed today legislation aimed at strengthening the public's access to Government information and records.

The bill, which was passed by a vote of 383 to 8, now goes to the Senate, where a judiciary subcommittee has approved a similar measure.

At the same time, the House Government Operations Committee, splitting 24 to 16, ap-

proved a separate bill that would let the Federal courts determine—except in an impeachment proceeding—whether a President could withhold information from Congress.

However, the bill now goes to the House Rules Committee, where it faces an uncertain fate, and Administration officials have warned of a presidential veto.

Under the committee bill, a Congressional committee could get House or Senate approval to go into court whenever the President directed an agency to

withhold information sought by the committee.

Several Democrats opposed the bill, which had the support of a number of Republicans. Representative Jack Brooks, Democrat of Texas, said it was "disastrous legislation" that would "inscribe into law the concept of executive privilege and give to every agency of the Government, as well as the President, the appearance of legitimacy in denying certain information to Congress."

The bill approved by the full House dealing with the public's

access to records would make the first changes in the Freedom of Information Act of 1966 and would give Federal courts the option of privately examining any classified documents to determine if the documents had been properly withheld from the public.

The provision would reverse a recent United States Supreme Court decision, which said that the contents of documents withheld from the public, such as for national security reasons, were not reviewable by the courts.

The Supreme Court's ruling in January was on a suit brought under the Freedom of Information Act by Representative Patsy T. Mink, Democrat of Hawaii, and other members of Congress who had sought to force the disclosure of classified documents relating to an underground nuclear test.

"This bill offers a sensible and workable compromise between a Democratic government and the Government's need for national security," Representative Spark M. Matsunaga, Democrat of Hawaii, said dur-

ing the relatively brief House debate.

There was no discussion of whether President Nixon would veto the bill if it reached him, but the Departments of Justice and Defense have opposed the measure in part on the ground that it would impose inflexible requirements on Government agencies.

The Justice Department had also asked Congress to delay action on the bill until an Administration study of ways to improve compliance with the

Freedom of Information Act was completed.

The 1966 law sought to grant Americans the right of access to Federal records and specified categories of information, such as that dealing with national security, trade secrets and intra-agency memos, which could be kept secret.

The bill passed today would, among other things, set various time limits for Federal agencies to respond to public requests for information and would require the agencies to make annual reports to Congress on how

they had implemented the act.

Also, the courts would be permitted to award the cost of legal fees and court costs to a plaintiff seeking information if the court decision went against the Government agency.

In addition, the bill would expand the definition of Federal agencies covered by the 1966 law to include agencies within the executive branch, such as the Office of Management and Budget and the National Security Council and Government corporations, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority.

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