Sunshine: Without laws, government keeps lots of secrets

Laws ensure that ‘democracy thrives in the light of day’

Open records pave path to changes
Where Sunshine Glowed

Editorial and opinion pages provided a wonderful forum to drive home the message of Sunshine Week. Whether it was explaining to readers what Sunshine Week is all about, or focusing on the issue of open government itself, the opinion pages hosted compelling and provocative thoughts on government accountability—not to mention a plethora of questionable weather puns.

Participants didn’t preach. Through editorials, editors’ notes and opinion columns they explained, they gave examples and they reminded readers why people need to hold their elected officials accountable. But they didn’t do all the talking themselves.

They also tapped lawmakers and public officials, lawyers who specialize in FOI issues, citizen panels, teachers, state and national FOI advocates, and others to comment on the importance of open government.

Of course, the editorial cartoonists weighed in. In addition to the wonderful cartoons they made available for all participants in the Sunshine Week 2005 Toolkit, the cartoonists at many newspapers used the opportunity to take a poke at national, state and local transparency tribulations.
USA Today made a strong case against government secrecy in its editorial, which read, “Welcome to the world of post-9/11 secrecy, where bureaucrats are turning the notion of an open government on its head.” An adjoining opposing view argued not against open government, but cautioned that it must be balanced with legitimate needs for secrecy. (left)

Editors at The Idaho Statesman in Boise explained to readers why open government is important to them and how they can exercise their rights. The editorial noted, “Every week should be Sunshine Week—because sunshine feeds the tree of informed citizenship. The tools are in your possession. Make the most of them.” (below)

This one-word headline in the Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch said it all: “Openness.” Calling openness “the American way,” the editorial stated, “particularly in state and local settings, authorities seem to think questions regarding schools, economic development, and other mundane items deserve to be treated as though they were intelligence plans to break al Qaeda.” The editors also tagged the commentary as part of the Sunshine Week package by using the logo with the text. (below)
The Des Moines Register was one of several papers that produced a series of editorials throughout Sunshine Week, generally pegged to the subject of that day’s news or feature articles on open government. The Register also used its own Sunshine Week icon, culled from a larger photo illustration, to tie together the paper’s coverage and commentary—and to explain to readers what the symbol meant. Editorial subjects included legislation, legal challenges and local heroes.
Orlando Sentinel columnists Myriam Marquez and Mike Thomas, writing Wednesday and Thursday of Sunshine Week, respectively, took two sides of Sunshine Week issues. While Marquez made the case against secrecy and for open records, Thomas raised privacy concerns.
Many newspapers invited local officials to write Sunshine Week columns about open government. In The San Diego Union-Tribune, a city councilwoman wrote about actions she and her colleagues have taken to fight government secrecy and called on other government officials, the public and members of the media “to support open government and the public’s right to access government in both word and deed.”
This Honolulu Advertiser cartoon by Dick Adair illuminated the state legislature’s self-created exemption from open meetings laws.

At the Detroit Free Press, Mike Thompson portrayed stacks of public records being blocked by an irreverent eclipse.

James Casciari, drawing for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers in Florida, alerted readers to threats of open government by the state legislature.
Sunny San Diego operates in the dark when it comes to city hall meetings, cartoonist Steve Breen suggested.

“Give me your huddled masses yearning for open government and accountability,” might be the stanza being read by Lady Liberty in this cartoon by Jonathan Todd commissioned by The Times in Shreveport, La.
Karen Winner, editor of The San Diego Union-Tribune, ran her editor’s note to readers on the front page, next to the paper’s first Sunshine Week article. Winner outlined the importance of open government and described the Union-Tribune’s plans for coverage.

A column by Nick Pappas of The Telegraph in Nashua, N.H., gave examples of how open government is important to journalists, but explained to readers that the right of access to information is one that belongs to the people. Pappas is now editor in chief of the newspaper.

Austin American-Statesman editor Rich Oppel described the secrecy inherent in the federal government and the Bush administration. Oppel told of legislation from Texas Sen. John Cornyn aimed at improving the Freedom of Information Act and encouraged readers to show their support for the measure.
The Honolulu Advertiser asked members of its very diverse Community Editorial Board to write short commentaries on the public’s right to know. There was no disagreement on its importance, but some discussed the need for limitations in certain instances.