COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Sunshine: Without laws, government keeps lots of secrets

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

Open records pave path to changes
The Public and Its Right to Know

One of the most successful messages conveyed during Sunshine Week 2005 was that open government is a right held by everyone in this country. Whether the information is from a federal, state or local government agency, or whether requestors are rich or poor, there should be no limits—other than obvious and reasonable exemptions, such as national security or privacy.

The impact of the thousands of news stories and commentary in print, online and broadcast was palpable. People were given the knowledge and the tools to get the information they needed to make their lives better and their communities stronger.

Participants went beyond news pages and programming to reach their communities. Public forums and workshops, contests, and official open government proclamations were just the beginning. Those in leadership roles also rallied their staffs and colleagues, with remarkable results.
South Dakotans for Open Government launched a “Let the Sun Shine In” essay contest during Sunshine Week, asking adults and students to write about why their freedom depends on open government.

Essays from the winning entrants—pictured here with SDOG President Chuck Baldwin (left) and Immediate Past President Stewart Huntington—are posted on the SDOG Web site at www.sdog.org/FOI.htm. Plans for 2006 include a poster or logo competition, and possibly even a podcast category.

The Times Herald of Port Huron, Mich., teamed with St. Clair County Community College and Comcast Cable to present a free public forum on Freedom of Information and open meetings during Sunshine Week. Speakers included the attorney for the Michigan Press Association and a representative from the state attorney general’s office. Among those attending were elected and appointed city officials, as well as senior officers from the city’s police department.

The University of Missouri’s 5th annual Curtis B. Hurley Symposium at the National Press Club in Washington used Sunshine Week as an opportunity to examine the “Seduction of Secrecy” inherent in Washington reporting. Led by Geneva Overholser, Hurley professor of public affairs reporting, the panel included leading journalists and FOI advocates. The event transcript is online at http://journalism.missouri.edu/news/2005/related/03-17-hurley-transcript.html.
The Idaho Statesman in Boise invited readers to contribute thoughts on how people use open government and why it’s important. Contributors included the chair of a volunteer group that monitors the county court system, local attorneys, a resident who frequently accesses public records, an elementary school principal, and local ranchers.
As Sunshine Week 2005 neared, Atlanta Journal-Constitution Editor Julia Wallace outlined the paper's vision for Sunshine Week for her staff, inviting story ideas and other ways to make the project "resonate for our readers."

To all,

At a time when national security, terrorism, privacy and government efficiency are raised as reasons for placing more limits on FOI access, ASNE and others are organizing a national Sunshine Sunday campaign under the banner “Your Right to Know.” This will be a national, multi-media effort to educate readers and users about the importance and effectiveness of open government.

Here in Atlanta, we will focus on this issue in the news pages, on the editorial pages and in community education/outreach efforts. We will begin in mid-January and continue our work through mid-March. Lea Donosky [elections editor] will be coordinating this effort with Hyde Post [ajc.com editorial director], who has fought long and hard for open government in Georgia.

As we develop our plans, we need your help:

1. If you know of any examples where open government helped to create a better community, please let us know. We are especially looking for unpredictable cases, where a regular citizen was able to use open government to bring about change.

2. If you have ideas of how to make this project resonate for our readers, let us know.

We’ll have an open brainstorming meeting at 5 p.m. Wednesday in the 7th floor conference room. If you can’t attend and have thoughts, please e-mail Lea.

Thanks.
Julia

Oregonian Executive Editor Peter Bhatia sent this note via e-mail to his colleagues across the state and posted it on the Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association Web site.
The governors of Alabama, Georgia, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia and Wisconsin; and the state legislatures of Maine, Michigan and Vermont issued Sunshine Week proclamations in March 2005 affirming their support for the importance of preserving open government. The proclamations are posted on the Sunshine Week Web site at www.sunshineweek.org/sunshineweek/govs.