

More requests going unanswered

WHAT IS SUNSHINE WEEK?

A week of March 13 has been named Sunshine Week by the organizations and other groups pressing for government openness, contending information is being withheld more often by state and city post-Sept. 11 security concerns.

This is the second in a two-part series to examine the use of the

By MARTHA MENDEGA

The Associated Press

Since 1998, many federal departments have been reducing the amount of information they release to the public — even as the government fields and answers more requests for information than ever, an Associated Press review has found.

The locations of stores and



idea Dick Cheney's 2001 energy policy task force are all among the records that the government isn't sharing with the public.

MORE INSIDE

Still waiting after 24 years? 7

Editorial Citizens, lawmakers should take part in Sunshine Week 6

Leafy: A push to improve access to public records 6

Even its members in the war on terror

But open government advocates worry that U.S. citizens'

Who wants records? Candidate, union and others

Editor's note: Across the country, news outlets and other media outlets and groups are participating in Sunshine Week, a celebration and re-examination of freedom of information. The special week begins today. This is part two in a two-part series.

"I won't give up fighting till the end. ... I educate, educate and try to get things done."
— Roger L. Burkholder, Rep.

"This is an easy issue that the average person asked government for information the day in 2004. Most of the time, over and over such the government figure ... and

IDEAS for 2006



Web site outlines information access, A7

Sunshine: Without laws, government keeps lots of secrets

Continued from Page A1

under the heading of taxpayer-funded campaign work.

Conflicting versions of events for Superintendent Deryl Erick, Herrick eventually found in a letter to the editor that he had written into his contract at least one new benefit for which he mistakenly thought he'd secured board approval.

More information obtained through the open records law below.

Report of Associated Press

U.S. Fred Goetz's complaint against the village of Grafton, filed with the state Equal Rights Division and the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), alleging age discrimination was the reason he was not chosen as police chief.

Open records laws can be without making formal, written requests. The Missouri Po Department, for instance, released the full report of internal investigation into death of Matthew Sheridan in

the story as part of a national public information effort known as Sunshine Week. Here's a sample of who asked for what from our local governments and why.

Please turn to RECORDS, A7

Miss who have 4,000 nearby also could help for County and Press found Brown B, chair of a Canal law is a lawyer and is for nine hours.

Reporter Mark Schmitt turned up information that revealed the truth about the city's push to change the way residents get utility services.

Mayor Buddy Dyer, now suspended, said then that his administration had done very little study of the idea to carve off the Orlando Utilities Com-

State's DNA
State Bureau
people over
B. Norman.

Laws ensure that 'democracy thrives in the light of day'

A week of coordinated news stories, columns and editorials about open government has

Getting information

Try these Web sites for information

B2 Orlando Sentinel

Open records pave path to changes

SUNSHINE

Reporters Mary Macklin and Denise Marie Bohne used a variety of public-records databases to develop a two-

was titled "Deadly But Legal" was culled from public records by staffers Roger Roy, Anthony Colaneri and Pedro Ruz Gomez.

To examine 60 cases in which Central Florida officers

ABOUT SUNSHINE WEEK

Throughout the week, local

were at the heart of a two-year investigation last year. Florida Department of Justice by reporters Mary Macklin and Denise Marie Bohne. That work is the



Sunshine Week 2006: Keep the Momentum

Sunshine Week 2005 was undeniably a hit; people responded and the coverage made an impact. Some might ask, Why do it again? And moreover, what's left to do? The answer to the second question really answers the first: there's still much to do, because official secrecy continues to increase.

The federal government's own numbers make a strong case for the need to continue and grow Sunshine Week. According to the Information Security Oversight Office, in 2001 there were 8.7 million decisions to classify documents. By 2004, that number had jumped to 15.6 million. During that same period, however, the number of pages declassified fell from just over 100 million to only 28.4 million.

Despite the fact that FOIA requests topped the 4 million mark for the first time, far less information was released in 2004 than in 2000, according to an analysis of FOIA reports by the Coalition of Journalists for Open Government. Further, even though requests processed fell by 13 percent, overall use of exemptions was up 22 percent.

The critical mass of attention to open government in 2005 got lawmakers' attention. In Washington, Sens. John Cornyn (R-Texas) and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) coordinated the introduction and hearings for their OPEN the Government Act of 2005 to Sunshine Week. In at least two states, Georgia and New York, Sunshine Week coverage spurred the legislature to ensure that access to government information was not further restricted or delayed. And several participants told us they'd heard from the public about how their coverage increased awareness.

In 2006, partnerships with non-journalism civic groups, libraries and others will be expanded, with community members even more involved in the conversation.



Ideas for 2006

Emergency Plan Audits

The Freedom of Information audit of 2005 can be the security audit of 2006. What are your state/community plans in the event of a natural disaster or terrorist attack? Are key segments of the plan available to the public? To first responders? How are Department of Homeland Security grants being used? How well are agencies communicating these plans with each other?

Web Site Comparisons

How do state and local government Web sites stack up when it comes to making information available online? How easy are they to use? This can be applied to individual schools as well as school districts.

FOIA at 40

The Freedom of Information Act was signed into law on July 4, 1966. Many new state laws followed. What great stories or community change can be tied to FOIA? What has happened to the law over the past 40 years? What impact has the evolution of the federal legislation had in states and communities? What's on the horizon?

Secrecy In, By and For the Courts

The courts are big players in government access. Not only the secret courts and tribunals that have been seen, or not seen, increasingly since 9/11, but also because of the courts' role in granting or denying access to records and meetings. What is the record of the courts in your state or the federal court for your region?

Access to Autopsy Reports

An increasing number of states are limiting access to autopsy reports. Some cases are pushed by privacy advocates worried about sensitive personal information becoming public. Are similar restrictions being floated in your state/community?

Local Heroes

Some of the most effective Sunshine Week stories profiled local residents and officials whose use of and belief in open government effected positive change in the community. These stories drive home the point that open government

Ideas for 2006

is for all people, not just journalists. Who are your local FOI heroes, and how have they used access laws to change public policy?

Community Think

Many news media outlets already have audience panels or advisory boards. What do they think about open government? Some participants put instant online polls on their Web sites asking people whether they had ever tried to access government information and what their experiences were.

News to Use

In 2005, participants produced great usage guides explaining what kind of information is available and how to get it. Some of the best was presented in a format that could be clipped and saved. Online sites provided a great adjunct resource not only as a way to package a week's worth of Sunshine stories, but also to provide links to FOIA resources and government sites, letter generators, and other tools.

Proclaiming Sunshine

A dozen governors and three state legislatures signed Sunshine Week proclamations in 2005, declaring their commitment to open government. Can we get all 50 states in 2006? If your governor won't sign one, why not? There are opportunities here for mayors, council leaders and other local officials to commit as well. The 2006 elections also provide an opportunity to quiz candidates on their approach to government transparency.

Students Need Sunshine, Too

Sunshine Week is a great opportunity to reach out to local schools and colleges. There are obvious means, such as working with student newspapers and broadcast operations, as well as Newspaper in Education and curriculum development. Other ideas include offering professional staff as speakers, giving special newsroom/plant tours, and working with students on creating news reports, advertising and other materials for their own Sunshine Week packages. And don't just focus on communications students. Sunshine Week provides opportunities for social studies and civics classes, math and economics, and more.

Ideas for 2006

No Participant Is an Island

News reports are a great way to reach the community; so are public forums, school outreach, essay contests, and local radio talk shows. It's also a safe bet that there are other media and civic groups in your state doing something for Sunshine Week. Work with your state and regional coordinators (www.sunshineweek.org/sunshineweek/coordinators), state press and broadcast associations, First Amendment and Freedom of Information coalitions, civic groups, libraries, wire service bureaus, professional associations—the list is endless. Sunshine Week is about impact of a coordinated discussion; there is strength in numbers.

Building Partnerships

In 2006, Sunshine Week is strengthening its partnerships with civic, library and other community groups to expand the franchise beyond news. Among the groups ramping up their plans for Sunshine Week 2006 are the League of Women Voters, the American Library Association, the American Association of Law Libraries and the Special Libraries Association. These groups are joining the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Open the Government, the Coalition of Journalists for Open Government and the National Freedom of Information Center for a national videoconference on March 13. Host sites around the nation will broadcast a program from the National Press Club in Washington, followed by their own local discussions. Find out if LWV or others are hosting events in your community and consider participating or covering the event.

Credits

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