Sunshine: Without laws government keeps lots of secrets

Laws ensure that ‘democracy thrives in the light of day

Open records pave path to changes

Sunshine Week BRIGHT IDEAS
The Culpepper (Va.) Star-Exponent wrapped up Sunshine Week with an editorial focusing on the importance of the public’s access to government meetings. “At times it is necessary for governing bodies to go into closed session to discuss sensitive matters. But it should happen rarely,” the paper said. “We, the people, have a right to know about not only the actions taken by our elected representatives, but also the motivation behind those actions.” The Star-Exponent cited the County Board of Supervisors as “the worst offender locally in locking itself behind closed doors for discussion out of public view.”

The Detroit (Mich.) News bracketed Sunshine Week with editorials that first examined the larger issue of the public’s right to information, and then turned its focus on the “too secretive” Michigan governments. “Democracies need free flows of information to function. But in Michigan, local and state governments often opt to keep secrets, especially potentially embarrassing ones such as extravagant expenses or mistakes,” the News wrote in the first commentary, giving examples of well-known big cases. In the second editorial, the News laid it out straight: “Officials on the public payroll are looking for more creative ways to choke off the flow of information and keep citizens in the dark.... Arrogant officials at all levels apparently believe the public is unwashed, not to be trusted with its own information. Those officials should retool their attitude and remember whom they work for.”

**Our View**

Government in the sunshine is the best kind

Today wraps up "Sunshine Week" across the nation, a week in which media outlets emphasized the importance of open government.

At times it is necessary for governing bodies to go into closed session to discuss sensitive matters. But it should happen rarely. We, the people, have a right to know about not only the actions taken by our elected representatives, but also the motivation behind those actions. Government in the sunshine fosters democracy and promotes transparency.

The Culpepper County Board of Supervisors has been the worst offender locally in locking itself behind closed doors for discussion out of public view. According to research last year by the Culpepper Citizen, from May 4, 2004 to May 3, 2005, county supervisors had 80 items on the agenda for closed sessions. By comparison, Ennorp County had just five agenda items that called for a closed session.

Consider that our neighbors to the north have about 24,000 more residents, 10 more public schools and an annual budget $78 million greater than Culpepper’s. This newspaper, along with the Citizen and Free Lance-Star, is now involved in a legal challenge over one of those closed sessions. The Virginia Supreme Court will soon hear the case.

Let’s be clear — we are not seeking special privileges as “the media.” We have no more rights than any citizen to access public officials and public records. We are just the eyes and ears of the community. If the public business is done out of sight, then we, as citizens, lose.

During this week, especially, we want to thank elected officials who resist the urge to go behind closed doors at the slightest hint of controversy. They are truly serving those who elected them. We also challenge elected officials who would prefer to err on the side of privacy to be more open with their actions.

Only when the sunshine illuminates the dark corners of deliberation can the public’s best interests be served.

**Editorials: Our Opinion**

Taxpayers and voters have a right to government data

Sunshine Week calls for free flow of information
democracies need free flows of information to function.

But in Michigan, local and state governments often opt to keep secrets, especially potentially embarrassing ones such as extravagant expenses or mistakes.

In the past, officials have used such an ongoing punitive costs to discourage citizen from pursuing an information request. But taxpayers pay both government salaries and the toll to collect records and should have access. Except for those records clearly linked to higher money, those who are not are subject to an ongoing punitive costs to discourage citizen from pursuing an information request. For example, the Monroe County Board of Warren wanted to know how Detroit paid for water and sewer bills. At first, Detroit officials claimed the information was exempt from disclosure because the data was in a computerized form. Therefore, computer software.

Warren won a court case in 2004 but contends it did not get any useful data and does not trust the matter to FOIA disputes include private citizens providing local governments that do not understand the phrase “freedom of information” or who choose to ignore the concept. In the past, officials have used such an ongoing punitive costs to discourage citizen from pursuing an information request. But taxpayers pay both government salaries and the toll to collect records and should have access. Except for those records clearly linked to higher money, those who are not are subject to an ongoing punitive costs to discourage citizen from pursuing an information request. For example, the Monroe County Board of Warren wanted to know how Detroit paid for water and sewer bills. At first, Detroit officials claimed the information was exempt from disclosure because the data was in a computerized form. Therefore, computer software.

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USA Today criticized the use of terrorism fears as an excuse to withhold information: “It is hard to see how the United States can promote its principles of freedom and democracy abroad if it is running from them at home.” The newspaper also offered an opposing view penned by a public affairs director at the Department of Justice: “While transparency is essential, so is our national security. Congress recognized this and expressly included in FOIA certain exceptions in order to preclude the disclosure of classified information that our enemies might use to harm us.” In an editorial the next day, USA Today followed up with examples of federal environmental and contracting secrecy, as well as secrecy for secrecy’s sake, “the most perplexing and insidious of all the secrecy excesses.” A column by Philip Meyer, Knight Professor of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and an Opinionline collection of commentary about secrecy completed the package.
The Herald Standard in Uniontown, Pa., declared there’s “no better laboratory in which to experiment than the Pennsylvania Legislature.” So for Sunshine Week, the newspaper published a special form for readers to send to lawmakers in an effort to get information on spending. The Herald Standard included legislators’ photos, office addresses, and phone and fax numbers. “So that you can find out who’s telling the truth – and just how responsive your state government is – we invite you to fill out, clip and mail the form letter at the bottom of this column,” the Herald Standard explained. “It’s nearly an exact duplicate of the ones that we use when we’re requesting information from government agencies. (Remember, too, that you don’t have to work for a newspaper to ask for such information; it’s your right as a citizen.)”

The White Hall (Ark.) Journal, utilized an editorial from The Star-Tribune in Minneapolis and cartoons from the Sunshine Week national Toolkit, along with a guest commentary from Brenda Blagg, regional editor of The Morning News in Springdale, and 2006 Arkansas state coordinator. In her column, Blagg encouraged readers to ask candidates seeking their votes where they stand on open government. The election, she wrote, “presents an opportunity to reinforce the ranks of government with people who believe in open government.”
The Daily Breeze, in Torrance, Calif., followed up Sunshine Week with a call to action on open government on the lead page of its Opinion section. “This past week was Sunshine Week, a time when politicians like to expound on their devotion to open government,” the commentary noted. “But the reality of California’s openness record is far removed from their rhetoric. From municipal government to the Legislature, a contempt for the public’s right to know is common.” Citing examples of attempts by public officials to withhold information, the newspaper pointed out, “There’s a powerful reason for government to work in an open fashion: It’s the law.”

The Telegraph, in Nashua, N.H., devoted the bulk of its Sunday Perspectives section front to Sunshine Week under the headline, “The truth matters.” Alongside an opinion column by Sunshine Week Honorary Chairman Hodding Carter III and a cartoon, both from the national Toolkit, Telegraph Editor in Chief Nick Pappas explained to readers why Sunshine Week and open government are important: “The challenge for journalists remains the same this year as it was last year and the year before that: convincing you that open government is not about selling newspapers, unnecessarily invading people’s privacy or embarrassing our elected leaders. It’s about empowering you to make a difference in your community.”
Editorial cartoons are without question one of the most popular Toolkit items each Sunshine Week. In 2006, with great thanks to the members of The Association of American Editorial Cartoonists, more than 60 cartoons were available to participants. Cartoonists included Ben Sargent of the Austin (Texas) American-Statesman (above); then-AAEC president Clay Bennett of The Christian Science Monitor in Boston, Mass., (right), who rallied the cartoonists and gathered their work for Sunshine Week; and Etta Hulme of The Fort Worth (Texas) Star-Telegram (below). All the cartoons from Sunshine Week 2006 can be viewed online at www.sunshineweek.org/sunshineweek/cartoons06. Please note that they can no longer be republished without express consent of the artists.
Open government imagery lent itself to both direct political skewers of leaders and events, and to more conceptual work about the subject. Among the many contributions to Sunshine Week’s editorial cartoon gallery were Indianapolis (Ind.) Star cartoonist Gary Varvel’s enlightening “Weapon of Mass Instruction” (top); a particular favorite of the Sunshine Week team by Bruce Beattie of The Daytona Beach (Fla.) News-Journal (middle); and an adventurous contribution by Wayne Stroot for South Dakotans for Open Government (below).
The Star Tribune of Minneapolis, Minn., promoted its Sunshine Week commentary with a refer box adjacent to its Sunday Twin Cities + Region section front article about official attempts to limit access to information. “The right [to information] the federal and state acts were written to enforce doesn’t belong to journalists, it belongs to Americans, every one of whom is entitled – even obliged – to keep an eye on what the government is doing,” the editorial read. “Unfortunately, laws alone can’t ensure government transparency. What’s necessary as well is a cooperative attitude among potential secret-keepers – who can serve best simply by assuming that any citizen question deserves a straight answer.” Also that Sunday, Reader Representative Kate Parry used her column to explain recent attacks on openness and to highlight examples of important stories the Star Tribune generated because of access to information. “It would be easy to fill a page with examples of how reporters have used public data to scrutinize public officials at every level of government,” Parry wrote.