

THE BAKER CITY HERALD

Editorial

Public records: Officials need to know law

The guardians of public records in Oregon, whether they be clerks, administrative assistants, elected officials or attorneys, need to be better informed about Oregon's Public Records Law. Except in rare circumstances, as defined by a growing number of exemptions, public records must be accessible to the public.

Sadly, that's not always the case in Oregon, which has one of the broadest public records law in the country. A recent audit by the Oregon Associated Press Newspaper Executives and the Society of Professional Journalists revealed that public access to records isn't what it should be. A recent public records audit revealed that almost half the 178 records requested in Oregon's 36 counties were denied.

Should citizens have a right to know who has been arrested for driving under the influence? Or what the school superintendent is being paid? Or to see the city budget? Or know who is carrying a concealed weapon?

Under Oregon law, citizens have a right to know. But the audit showed that many of the keepers of the records either don't know the law or feel that for some reason citizens shouldn't have access to such records without approval of a sheriff or a district attorney.

The public records audit showed that some public entities in the state, especially sheriff's offices, have lost sight of who they are working for and are less than cordial when approached about public records.

Auditors, all of whom were volunteers, encountered reactions ranging from suspicion to disdain. Some auditors felt as if they were being treated like criminals simply for asking for records that are by law public.

In Union County, an auditor was received openly at La Grande City Hall and the La Grande School District office. The same couldn't be said for the sheriff's office, although the office did provide the records requested.

In Wallowa County, another auditor experienced a similar feeling at the sheriff's office and never did get one of the records requested. And she was stonewalled at the Enterprise School District.

Statewide, the results were worse. In fact, deplorable in some counties. One auditor left an office in tears. One was followed. Another was put through a criminal record check.

The bottom line is that too few Oregonians are familiar with the Public Records Law. Citizens might have to research their rights to access records, but public employees should be trained about the law. Unless their supervisor, be it a city manager, a sheriff or a superintendent, has been around for a while, too few clerks and administrative assistants have a clue about the records law or how to address requests for records.

Even elected officials, it seems, don't have much knowledge about citizen's right to access records or the concept behind Oregon's Open Meetings Law. More and more public officials seem inclined to keep citizens _ the people who pay their salaries _ at bay.

Citizens not only have a need to know what their public entities are doing, they have a right to know. Oregon can do better.

