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Let the sunshine in

Good government is open government

The Register-Guard According to Paul McMasters, ombudsman for the First Amendment Center in Arlington, Va., the U.S. government created 3.6 million secret documents in 1996. The current annual rate is 14 million _ a fourfold increase in secrecy in less than a decade.

Newspapers, other media and journalistic organizations are drawing attention to the trend toward government secrecy today _ Sunshine Sunday _ and throughout the week to come.

Open government shouldn't matter only to people in the news business. Just as the First Amendment belongs to all Americans, open government concerns all citizens. When secrecy becomes the default setting for government agencies, and when public officials can escape scrutiny by stamping "secret" on documents, the flow of information that is vital to self-government is pinched to a trickle. Everyone has a stake in ensuring that government conducts its business in the open, in full view of the people it serves. That's the only way to ensure accountability and to obtain the broad support that comes through informed public participation in decision-making.

The impulse toward secrecy is strong at all levels of government. Public officials, whether they're federal Cabinet officers or city clerks, would prefer not to have people looking over their shoulders. In some cases, they've succeeded in getting Congress or the Legislature to place limits on open-government laws such as the Freedom of Information Act or Oregon's Public Records Law. The bill creating the Department of Homeland Security, for instance, exempts documents labeled "critical infrastructure" from disclosure, placing large amounts of information relating to public health, land-use and economic development off-limits to public review.

Oregon's Public Records Law grows more encrusted with exceptions in every legislative session.

In other cases, public officials simply ignore state or federal laws intended to ensure public access to government documents, or do all they can to make obtaining such documents as slow, difficult and expensive a process as possible.

As an experiment, The Associated Press in Oregon, supported by newspapers around the state, checked city and county agencies' compliance with Oregon's Public Records Law. The AP's auditors asked for records that are clearly public under the law, such as applications for concealed weapons permits and police reports of drunken driving arrests. More often than not, public officials refused to release the documents or provided them only after being informed of the law's requirements. In some instances, the requests were met with hostility.

The results of this experiment come as no surprise. Many public officials' instinct is to treat public records as private property, often under the guise of protecting people's privacy _ even though the law allows agencies to redact, or black out, personal information before releasing public documents. If reporters or volunteers working on The AP's project have trouble getting officials to comply with the law, citizens who may be

less familiar with their rights will have an even harder time penetrating the wall of secrecy.

A government that operates in secret is unaccountable to the public. At best, such a government lacks the benefit of the people's insights and support. At worst, the eventual result is corruption. Every day should be Sunshine Sunday, and every American should protect the right to know what governments are doing.