

THE (GRANTS PASS) COURIER

March 15, 2005

Editorial

Without open records, we're all in the dark

Members of the general public might pooh-pooh the fact the media have declared this week "Sunshine Week" to increase public awareness of fading access to government records. They may think this is someone else's problem, namely journalists'.

However, they would be terribly wrong if they thought this way. Keeping government records open should be the concern of all Americans. That's because "the people" can't effectively run this country if they don't know what's happening.

The news this Sunshine Week is discouraging in that Americans are increasingly losing access to what's happening from city hall to Washington, D.C. Most federal agencies are releasing less requested information than they did in 1998. In denying requests, many cite security concerns in the wake of 9/11.

On the state level, the Daily Courier and other newspapers in Oregon sent volunteers to public offices on Jan. 19 in a test of this state's open records law passed in 1973 (see front page story today). The law is supposedly one of the strongest in the United States, yet only a little more than half of the 178 public records requested were produced. Officials in only two of the 36 counties granted all five record requests. Josephine County fell in the middle, with its compliance rated at between 60 and 79 percent.

In addition, legislators continue to chip away at the state law by passing individual exemptions. Since 1973, lawmakers have approved more than 300 individual exemptions.

It's understandable that many members of the public can view this strangling of the flow of information as a media problem, because the majority don't deal with such things. They have jobs and soccer games to haul their children to and frantic grocery shopping to prepare for weekend visitors. Most must depend on the media to get them the news, even if it involves fighting officials for records.

But if the public is apathetic about open records laws and the media lose access, they lose, too. They will lose the means to find out such things as what benefits Josephine County managers enjoy, why the school board paid an Illinois Valley High School teacher \$10,000 to disappear and why the Grants Pass City Council fired City Manager Bill Peterson after 12 years on the job.

The Daily Courier has cited the open records law in pursuing these and many other stories in the last 1 1/2 years.

That law can help, too, if an ordinary citizen wants to find out, for example, if public officials approved a new subdivision nearby even after being warned it would create a dangerous traffic situation.

Most officials are honest and conscientious, but it's still imperative Americans insist the sun of public scrutiny be allowed to shine into government. Officials doing their jobs competently in the public's best interest have nothing to fear from that sunshine. If they aren't, their almost 300 million employers need to know.

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