

THE (MEDFORD) MAIL TRIBUNE:

Officials 'unaware' of law, "puzzled" but mostly supplied records

By JONEL ALECCIA

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Jackson County residents seeking public records have a pretty good chance of getting them as long as the citizens are persistent and informed, a local audit showed.

In four out of five instances, employees of local government agencies turned over open documents, though several weren't aware of public records requirements and others expressed puzzlement at the requests.

"I was surprised at a couple places that didn't seem to have any idea about public records and what it meant," said Jim McChesney, 56, a Central Point man who volunteered as an auditor.

Only one agency, the Jackson County Sheriff's Department, failed to produce the requested material, public records of concealed handgun permits.

Sgt. Bob Grantham told McChesney the records could not be released because they contained personal information.

"When I asked if they were not public documents, he said yes, but that one had to ask for specific ones or types and that the person who wanted the information would have to pay what he indicated would be a lot of money to have staff gather them," McChesney said.

Grantham didn't return a call about the matter.

Staff at the city of Ashland were the most cooperative, turning over a copy of the city budget promptly and willingly.

"Took a total of two minutes from request to having the city budget document thick as a volume of Encyclopedia Britannica in my hands," noted McChesney.

Sheer practice might be a factor, said Fran Berteau, who works in the office of Ashland's mayor and City Council members.

"Ashland's pretty involved when it comes to public issues," she said, estimating that city staff members field one or two requests for public documents each week. "We're used to it."

Responses from other agencies were mostly positive. Staff at the city of Medford took a half-hour to find and copy records of City Manager Mike Dyal's expense reports, McChesney indicated.

"They asked a lot of questions and I did my best not to lie," said McChesney, who, like other auditors, was instructed to truthfully answer that he was working on a project.

"But in the end, I got the documents."

Citizens request public documents from Medford officials about once a week, said Lynette O'Neal, office administrator for the city.

Staffers work to fulfill the requests in a prompt and friendly manner. They'll copy up to 10 pages of documents for free, O'Neal said. She said workers don't typically question people about the purpose of their requests.

"If it's public record, it doesn't matter what they want it for," she said.

A worker in the personnel office at the Medford school district agreed to show McChesney the employment contract for Interim Superintendent Kathy McCollum, but declined to print a copy without approval from Personnel Director Dan Zaklan. After

consulting with Zaklan, she mailed a copy to McChesney the same day.

"While we do abide by the public records laws, every person who works for us doesn't know them," said Zaklan, noting that consulting with a supervisor before releasing the documents was a reasonable and prudent response.

A Central Point Police Department clerk told McChesney he couldn't see the police log entries, although she agreed to copy the information from the computer. That included name, charge, location, date, time and arresting officer, McChesney said.

"She printed it out, was a bit reluctant to make me a copy, but did when I asked again," McChesney said.

McChesney, a former journalist and occasional freelance writer for the Mail Tribune, said seeking documents as a private citizen was enlightening.

"It was a very interesting experience, especially dealing with the puzzlement and refusals," he said.