

## THE (PENDLETON) EAST OREGONIAN

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Editorial by publisher Dave Balcom, 3-13:

They call it a "Sunshine Law" in many states because the idea of a law ensuring public access to government records was born out of corruption in Florida. It caught on because the shining light of an informed public will pierce the dark, smoke-filled back rooms where such shenanigans are thought to take place \_ like the sun fills a shaded valley.

Elsewhere in today's paper you can read the results of a statewide audit of how accessible public records are in Oregon. Each of the auditors' newspapers used staffers who were unknown to city, county or school officials were given specific records to request. All of those record requests had been ascertained to be public for the asking.

In a shameful number of cases, that wasn't true both here in Eastern Oregon and across the state. Worse than the ignorance and lack of training evident in most refusals, was the frequent incidents of arrogant hostility on the part of folks who are paid to serve us. There is an entire political genre built on discrediting the media.

Whole campaigns have been waged where if you didn't know better you'd think the newspaper was among the candidates. But this audit wasn't about newspapers, even though it was inspired by the Society of Professional Journalists and the Associated Press Managing Editors. The folks walking up to the school district office and asking for the superintendent's contract were not known to be from the paper.

The lady that walked up to the sheriff's office to ask for an arrest report wasn't the "cop shop" reporter, just a citizen who has a right to ask and a right to know. It's true that most people just don't have time or motive to go ask for a record, and most wouldn't know what is available under the law. And it's apparent the officials in many cases aren't the folks to teach us.

With that knowledge, the newspaper in its role of "anybody," goes through that process daily to save readers the trip and the aggravation. If you think it through, however, there's as much at stake in that daily routine of perusing public documents as there is in any other oversight of government.

We've all heard the stories about "connected" people who are stopped for drunk driving or drug use or whatever, and upon being identified as a child of "a big shot" or government official, gets a pass from the officer. In most cases, that's just urban myth, but if you really think that happened, the police log is right there for you to know. Every traffic stop, every call out, every action of the officers on duty is reported on the log and that log is public.

Most Americans believe the Constitutional protections against random search and seizure and unwarranted arrest are among the most sacred of all our personal freedoms. That's why jail logs are public; it keeps your loved ones from "disappearing" into the legal system. Couldn't happen here?

True, as long as public records are truly public. There are lessons in this audit that cannot be allowed to go unmarked: Local government leaders must abide by all the laws, just like we do. Nothing is more repugnant than a police department that thinks its records are private and damn the laws.

Local government leaders must spend the time to train their front office staff the way the folks in Milton-Freewater's office have been trained: "It's right there, and if you can't find what you want, we'll help you" is the epitome of public service and the spirit of open government. Having a bitter civil servant treat you as if you owed them something is fuel for the anti-tax crowd. Citizens must hold their local government leaders to the highest standard of openness.

The next time someone is prevented from seeing a public document, it may be important to you.