

THE (ROSEBURG) NEWS-REVIEW

Open public records vital for free society EDITORIAL

A government that is open to the public it serves is a cornerstone of a free society. Without openness in records and decision-making, a government could control the people instead of the other way around.

It doesn't take much imagination, or looking across borders at other countries, to envision what that would mean. Imagine a country where a citizen could get arrested, maybe given a trial, and imprisoned, without any public notice.

That couldn't happen here.

In Douglas County, emergency dispatch logs would show police involvement.

An arrest record, open to the public's perusal, must be written that details the arrest and initial charges. Nearly every step through the criminal justice system is open, and citizens can sit in and watch the trial firsthand if they so choose.

That's the dramatic stuff. There are thousands of other instances where having government records open to the public has a positive effect on our lives.

Is an official's nephew being paid more than other public employees with the same experience? Go down and look. Is it true that an official ran up a big tab at a convention and billed the county? Ask to see the expense report. Was that really the lowest bid for new squad cars? Read them and see. Follow the money. Day after day, news reporters _ the eyes and ears of the public _ ask these questions. When they are told something of consequence by a public official, they usually ask, "Would you show me that, please?"

Unfortunately, this vital freedom of public records is being eroded. Especially with the new fears of terrorism or safety of private information, people are willing to lock up public records without realizing the downside.

It's a topic that journalists talk about often. As a group, we decided it was time to talk with the public about it as well. Oregon newspapers teamed up to investigate how well the state's public records laws are being followed. The results were somewhat as expected: not all that well.

Oregonians are fortunate our state has one of the more open public records laws. It's important they followed and it's a shame when they are not.

Douglas County residents should be glad to know that local public records are indeed open for the most part. A volunteer walked in various public offices and asked for five examples of records that state law clearly states are open to the public. With just a few hitches, local officials complied. When they didn't, they produced the records after a day or two of research. Residents of some communities in the state were not so lucky.

In one school district, the superintendent reported the citizen auditor to the police, simply for requesting his contract. The superintendent's excuse was that he was protecting the "safety of the school." Our auditor, however, walked out of Roseburg School Superintendent Lee Paterson's office with a copy of his contract within just a few minutes.

The missteps in Douglas County, such as not providing concealed weapon permits, were understandable, considering the fact that these are rarely requested and not all employees who deal with the public are up on all the open records laws.

We hope this exercise reminds the public and the agencies who serve them that there are strong laws that require records be open. We encourage the public demand that public records are indeed public, and resist efforts to weaken our open records laws.