

THE (SALEM) STATESMAN JOURNAL

Editorial

March 13

It's your government. You pay for it. You own it. You get to judge for yourself how well it's working. That's the theory, anyhow. The Statesman Journal joined The Associated Press and the Society of Professional Journalists in testing that concept across Oregon.

Overall, the state flunked.

Asked to produce certain records such as the city budget and the five most recent drunken-driving arrests, some public employees were confused about what to do. Some incorrectly insisted that the information was off-limits.

The Clatsop County sheriff ran a criminal-record check on one visitor. The Canyon City school superintendent, wary about being asked to produce his contract, called police.

A few officials stood out for knowing the law and treating visitors with respect _ people such as Dallas City Manager Roger Jordan, who readily provided the city budget and a summary of his own expenses.

But on the whole, our Oregon is becoming a more secretive place.

This week the Statesman Journal begins a series of news stories and editorials focusing on public records. It is part of "Sunshine Week: Your Right to Know," an effort by newspapers, magazines, broadcast media and bloggers across the land.

Why should you care? Because paper and computer trails of information can alert you, the public, to information you need to know. Even if higher-ups don't want you to know it.

Democracy depends on no-holds-barred discussion. Conservative ideas or liberal ones, brilliant or crackpot notions _ bring them out and test them against one another.

If we only debate what government spoon-feeds us, our discourse is a sham. We need watchdogs, lots of them, who will snoop elsewhere and ask: How do we know that's true? Who is profiting from this? Who is really paying for it? Is there more to this than meets the eye?

That's where public records come in. By analyzing them, the Statesman Journal has been able to inform readers that:

The Salem-Keizer School District received complaints about a middle-school band teacher for years before he was arrested on charges of sexually abusing students. It hadn't placed him on leave, hired an independent investigator or reported him to police.

Patient-caused violence surged at Oregon State Hospital in 2004; however, such assaults rarely were investigated by state police or prosecuted by the Marion County District Attorney's office.

Former Rep. Dan Doyle of Salem, a leader in crafting the state budget, failed to pay federal income taxes for several years before taking office. His campaign reports contained instances of questionable spending that led to his resignation.

But public-records laws aren't just for journalists. Anyone should be able to see such records without being stonewalled or reported to police.

You should be able to trace political contributions to your city councilor and track possible conflicts of interest. You should be able to figure out if your county commissioner's property could gain value as a result of a land-use decision. You should be able to learn what perks your school superintendent gets and whether state bonuses make it into your English-language-learner's classroom.

Officials give lip service to Oregon's supposedly great Public Records Law. But if average citizens can't make use of it, it's not worth much.