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Some local officials leery about handing over public records

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Confusion.
Suspicion.
Resistance.

Four university students drew those responses when they sought public records on behalf of the Statesman Journal.

They asked to review copies of a city budget, a city manager's latest expense report, a school superintendent's contract, concealed-handgun-permit applications and records of the five people most recently arrested by police on charges of drunken driving.

They got some of the records, obtained only parts of others and were flatly denied a few.

The local results were consistent with the statewide findings of Project Open Oregon, a survey of government compliance with Oregon's Public Records Law.

The four local students asked for records at government offices in Marion, Polk, Linn and Benton counties Jan. 19.

They recorded government officials' reactions to the requests for documents that the public legally is entitled to review.

Oregon's Public Records Law, which was enacted in 1973, is designed to ensure that most government records are available to any citizen.

State law requires that access be provided without unreasonable delays or costs. The law doesn't require that people who request public information identify themselves or explain why they want records.

But all four of the Statesman Journal's public-records "auditors" repeatedly were asked who they were and why they wanted to see the records.

Other local findings:

All four students were allowed to see copies of city budgets.

In Dallas, the budget was provided within three minutes. A helpful and courteous city of Salem employee did even better, handing over the budget within a minute.

Three got to see superintendents' contracts.

However, the Salem-Keizer School District required that the student first file a written request with the human resources director.

The Dallas School District showed the superintendent's contract but denied a request for a photocopy.

The Corvallis School District provided access to the contract but took 11 days to comply.

Requests for city managers' expense reports drew mixed responses.

Dallas and Salem officials provided them, but staff members in Albany and Corvallis denied such a thing existed.

In Dallas, City Manager Roger Jordan left a meeting to personally handle the request.

He provided a summary of expenses and explained it, and a staff member provided a copy.

Staff members in Salem sent the student to three offices for the report. They also asked the student for her name and said she had to pay for photocopies of expenses before seeing them but eventually withdrew both conditions.

Only one student was granted timely access to arrest reports.

Salem police refused the request, saying it was the department's policy not to provide records while cases were pending.

In Corvallis and Albany, police said that each arrest report would cost \$5 and take at least seven days to provide.

Dallas police also charged \$5 each but provided them the day they were requested.

All students were emphatically denied access to the handgun permits.

The students called the survey a learning experience.

Michelle Theriault, a Statesman Journal intern who is a senior at Willamette University, said the confusion prompted by her records requests shows that the open-records law is little used or understood by government employees.

"Much less than a coordinated plot to withhold information from the public, the infrequency with which public records laws are exercised has led to system-wide cobwebs on the machinery of public disclosure," she wrote.

"While seeking records that are by law public records, I was surprised how easy and how difficult my requests were handled at various city departments," wrote Judith McClintock, a Western Oregon University junior and former Statesman Journal intern. "The policy allowing the release of certain information to the public obviously needs to be revised or looked at by the state so each department will have consistent responses."