

Open government: Local heroes making data accessible

By Chris Wacker

The more accessible a government is, the more citizens are getting involved.

This year Sunshine Week was dedicated to "Local Heroes" for the freedom of information — folks who were particularly effective at advancing the cause of government openness in their communities.

Apparently, the sponsor of this annual FOI awareness event, the American Society of News Editors, understands where the real battleground in the war on government secrecy is, while the media they work for is still overreaching.

The majority of Sunshine Week stories this year decry secrecy in Washington. Largely ignored are the local FOI heroes opening doors to government records, not just in the name of the public's right to know, but also to make their governments run smarter.

City clerks and information technology employees are increasingly using computer software to convert cabinets full of files into databases.

Those databases are making FOI file searches, and most other aspects of government paperwork, as simple as searching sports scores on Yahoo. Many communities are building portals in their government websites that permit 24-hour online access to those databases.

These databases, done correctly, are expensive and time consuming to build. But the return on investment through greater operational efficiency rivals any other infrastructure a government can undertake. It's the clerks and information technology folks who know this and end up having to sway sometimes skeptical city councils for funding.

Aventura citizens can view city commission meeting minutes, agendas, resolutions, recaps and ordinances dating back to 1996 on its government records website portal. Boca Raton's website offers video footage to go with the various municipal meeting minutes citizens

can search out, along with more intriguing government minutia like campaign finance reports. Oakland Park is posting all of the above along with a feature that lets residents search meeting video footage for specific subject discussions.

Looking farther afield, the list of records being made instantly available, sans Freedom of Information request forms, just gets longer. Elkhart County, Ind., residents can track down leaky underground oil storage tanks, toxic waste sites, addresses of sexual predators and meth labs in their neighborhoods. Southold, N.Y., made resident building permits and plans publicly available until residents complained that was a little too much freedom of information.

This all points to a trend where the more accessible a government is, the more citizens are getting involved in that government. City Manager Eric Soroka said Aventura's system is several years old and

will likely stay as is because that's what the public has asked for. Oakland City Clerk Jannett Smith said her office has taken the lead in making records more available and the public has responded. She estimates FOI requests at her window have dropped almost 90 percent as the public have turned to the government website to seek out the records and video feeds they need.

Numerous other communities across the country offer similar anecdotes while Aiken, S.C., produced hard numbers showing traffic at its government records website portal was ten times that of visits to other pages.

Will this local trend translate into more openness at the Fort Knox of government secrets — Washington? If not, I think we all agree, it should.

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