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State fares well in online records

*By Desiree Hunter
The Associated Press*

When Daniel Roberts set out to track how money was being swapped between Alabama political action committees, he was pleasantly surprised to find the information easily accessible on the Internet.

"I really don't think it's as bad as you would think it is," Roberts, a former political blogger, said of the state's online presence. "There's a lot of good stuff there."

Alabama ranked 19th in a 50-state survey that examined online government information, but advocates for open government said far more online access to public records should be available in the state.

Alabama had information in 13 of 20 online categories that were checked in the Sunshine Week 2009 Survey of State Government Information. Surveyors scanned government Web sites and assessed such factors as whether information was up-to-date and clearly linked, if full reports or only summaries were available, and whether viewing and downloading were free.

Alabama appears to be doing a fair job when compared to other states, but a survey by the Knight Fellows in Community Journalism at the University of Alabama found that 25 of the 67 counties in Alabama don't have Web sites at all.

That unevenness mirrors findings in the national survey, and advocates said the hodgepodge is troubling.

"It would seem to me that the ideal of a Jefferson democracy depends in large part upon an informed electorate, and the more accessible information is about the government, the better equipped the public is to be wise in our own participation," Gilbert Johnston, a Birmingham attorney who specializes in media law, said.

Johnston said the amounts some agencies are charging for public records -- sometimes \$1 or more per page -- also is a problem.

Alabama was among just nine states to provide school inspection and safety records online and among 11 states to make school bus inspections available on the Web.

The state did not have online information for seven categories, including consumer complaints and disciplinary actions against attorneys and financial disclosure reports of state officials.

Roberts used what he learned online about political action committees two years ago while a student to create his own PAC -- called "DanPAC" -- to call attention to the practice of PAC-to-PAC transfers.

"I actually think most of the departments in Alabama had done a pretty good job with the resources they have of putting stuff online," he said. Still, "I don't think they take advantage of the latest technology."

Chris Roberts, a journalism professor at the University of Alabama whose students conducted the county-by-county survey, said they weren't surprised that nearly 40 percent didn't have Web sites.

Many "don't even bother to put agendas or even minutes up," he said.

"In this state, where there's so much power held by county commissions and city councils, it's important for people to know what's going to happen, but forcing them to drive to city hall or to the courthouse to find copies of agendas and be charged between 50 cents and \$2 a page seems quite ridiculous when all it takes is to put a PDF file online," he said.

According to the university study, the most common information counties provided online was a list of their commissioners, though only 17 had links to council meetings and 11 had links to agendas for upcoming meetings. Many sheriff offices had sites but only 11 had updated lists of jail inmates.

Baldwin County had the most complete site with 21 of the 22 items researchers sought, followed by Shelby County with 16 of the items.

Chris Roberts, the journalism professor, said counties without county government sites were generally those among the state's poorer and more rural: Barbour, Bibb, Bullock, Butler, Choctaw, Clay, Cleburne, Conecuh, Coosa, Crenshaw, Fayette, Franklin, Greene, Hale, Henry, Lamar, Lawrence, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Randolph, Sumter and Washington.

Lisa Lewis, who handles accounts payable and information technology for Barbour County, said there's one main reason why her county and others like it aren't online.

"It all boils down to money and there's none, zero," Lewis said.

She said the county has looked into getting a Web site in the past but the interest comes from out-of-towners, not locals -- many of whom don't have Internet access.

"Those 25 counties (without sites) are the counties that had the lowest available funds," she said.

Barbour relies on two local newspapers to get the word out about meetings, she said, but getting a site just isn't a priority right now.

"I would love to see it in the future," Lewis said. "I'm the IT person here and it would be great to try to be technologically advanced, but I don't foresee it happening within the next three to five years, if then."

The national study of state government information offered online was developed by several media organizations, including the National Freedom of Information Committee and the Society of Professional Journalists' FOI Committee.
