



The Birmingham News

Turn bright spotlight on nuts and bolts of government - Page 2

Jefferson County commissioners found themselves embarrassed again this month after this newspaper reported plans to spend \$8,341 to buy six heavy-duty trash cans for the new Bessemer courthouse. Once word hit the newspaper, some commissioners decided cheaper cans will hold trash just as well.

The deal is less than peanuts for a county suffocating under billions of dollars of debt, but it speaks to a larger point about the power of information. In this instance, commissioners said they didn't notice the line item on the county finance committee's agenda.

"It got by me," Commissioner Jim Carns told Birmingham News reporter Barnett Wright.

There's a solution: Put another 600,000 or so sets of eyes on the government.

Jefferson County has a Web site where you can pay your taxes and, in a mere three clicks, see a December 2001 press release touting how the commission "is on the cutting edge with innovative financing."

Jeffcointouch.com, however, provides little of the nuts and bolts of government information that citizens deserve and increasingly want. And, sadly, many other local governments have the same problem with making it easy for the public to find out what's happening at courthouses and city halls.

Today marks the start of Sunshine Week, an annual activity that highlights the importance of open government and freedom of information across the United States. This year's focus is access to online information.

I teach 10 University of Alabama students working toward master's degrees in community journalism through a program sponsored by the Knight Foundation. Despite the difficulties in the newspaper industry, our hope is that many of them will land jobs working at small-town papers across the state and nation. To give them - and you - an insight into the availability of government information online, they surfed through scores of official city and county government Web sites across Alabama. While we are not finished with our look at city sites, we came away disheartened by what we found - or, more appropriately, what we did not find - on county government sites.

We found that nearly two-fifths of the state's 67 county governments still do not have Web sites. Those 25 counties include the usual rural and poor suspects, and they are home to 10 percent of Alabama voters who cannot easily find out what their county governments are doing.

We also saw that the state's 42 county Web sites vary wildly in the quality of useful information. While some sites were impressive, others haven't been updated for years. And too many seem to be more about public image than useful public information.

Students went looking for 22 categories of information, including commission minutes and agendas, budget information, ways to look up property and probate records, and updated lists of jail inmates.

You can guess what was most common - pictures and contact information for commissioners. (Rule 1 for county work: Take care of the commissioner first.)

Baldwin County was tops, with 20 of the 22 items online. Shelby was second, at 16. Jefferson tied for fifth, with 13 types of information we sought. (We could be wrong, of course. Many county sites are bowling-show ugly and harder to navigate than Malfunction Junction.)

Just 17 counties included minutes of meetings, which provide the record of what public figures have done. Just 11 included timely links to agendas for upcoming meetings, which forecast what public officials might do.

Why is online access to such dishwasher-dull information so important? Putting information on the Web is vital because:

The public - which pays billions of dollars in taxes - deserves to know what its governments are doing.

It saves time and money. When counties seek to charge 50 cents to \$2 a page for public documents, it's a no-brainer to put this information online. And it's often easier for an Alabamian to win "American Idol" than to find a parking spot near a courthouse.

Sunshine is the best disinfectant, as the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said.

Consider the case of federal inmate 25387-001, also known as former Jefferson County Commissioner Jeff Germany. A jury in 2006 found him guilty of using nonprofits to shuttle \$479,990 in taxpayer money to family and friends. He's scheduled to be released in February 2010.

All of his spending showed up as line items in county agendas and minutes, those public records still not online today.

Germany's fellow commissioners assumed the money for nonprofits such as the East Thomas Baseball Association actually bought lights for baseball fields. It took a 2002 story from The News to trigger the questions that led to Germany's conviction.

It's easy to wonder what might have happened had someone from the East Thomas Baseball Association seen the group's name on meeting minutes and started asking questions sooner. It's also easy to wonder how politicians would act differently if they knew more eyes were on them.

In an age when public trust in government is plunging and Internet access is rising, local governments have no excuse for not shedding more light on themselves. Since you're paying for this, you should demand it. For a look at what Alabama county and city Web sites have to offer, go to: www.chrisrob.com/sunshine. For more information about national Sunshine Week, go to: www.sunshineweek.org. Chris Roberts, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the University of Alabama's journalism department, covered the Jefferson County Commission for The Birmingham News during the early 1990s. E-mail: croberts@bama.ua.edu.

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