

Online access a mixed bag for state and county governments in Alabama

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Access to government information in Alabama is like a typical spring day: You may get a nice dose of sunshine, or clouds could cast you into darkness.

Those are the current conditions of online access in the state, according to an Associated Press story Friday as national Sunshine Week wound down. The annual event seeks to raise public awareness about the need for open government.

The good: Alabama ranked 19th of 50 states in a survey that examined online information. Surveyors scanned government Web sites to see whether information is up-to-date and clearly linked, if full reports instead of summaries are available, and whether viewing and downloading is free. In Alabama, they found information in 13 of 20 categories they checked. Among the gaps: consumer complaints, disciplinary actions against attorneys and financial disclosure reports of state officials. Obviously, there is plenty of room for improvement.

The not-so-good: More than two dozen of Alabama's 67 counties don't even have Web sites, a class of Knight Fellows in Community Journalism at the University of Alabama found. The students looked for information in 22 categories and found no county's Web site offered everything. Baldwin County came closest, posting information in 20 categories.

Closer to home, access isn't quite as good. While Shelby County ranked second with 16 items the researchers sought, Jefferson County managed to post records in just 13 of 22 categories. Jefferson County is missing some of the most basic information: commission meeting minutes and agendas.

"It would seem to me that . . . the more accessible information is about the government, the better equipped the public is to be wise in our own participation," said Gilbert Johnston, a Birmingham attorney who has represented The News in many government access cases.

If Johnston is right -- and he is -- the public is not nearly as well-equipped as it should be. County governments, in particular, must do a better job of providing public information to the public, and online access is the easiest, most convenient way.

Not surprisingly, many of the counties that have no Web sites are in poorer, rural parts of the state. As Lisa Lewis, who handles information technology for Barbour County, told The AP: "It all boils down to money, and there's none, zero."

Unfortunately, many county budgets are strapped for cash. That means online access to public information won't improve much anytime soon.

To find out how your county fared in the Knight Fellows survey, visit www.chrisrob.com/sunshine/.

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