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800 OUR OPINION

Let sunshine help restore public trust

The News Tribune

"When a man assumes a public trust, he should consider himself as public property." — Thomas Jefferson

In that quote, the namesake of our city and the seat of Missouri government offered a keen observation on the link between openness and trust in public life.

Open government is the theme of Sunshine Week, observed nationwide through Saturday.

This year's observance comes at a time when it is much needed.

Faith in government is in serious decline.

The federal government continues to run up deficits while Americans endure tough economic times and rampant unemployment.

Meanwhile, public officials continually are caught cheating taxpayers,

cheating on spouses and damaging public trust.

Erosion of public trust has wide-ranging consequences.

In an analysis published on the March 2 Opinion page, Associated Press correspondent Liz Sidoti wrote: "Long term, such a lack of confidence in the nation's biggest institutions could turn society's skepticism to debilitating cynicism. It could spread animosity through society, crimping America's historic optimism, fueling incivility — if not paranoia — among the people and encouraging disrespect of authorities of all types, at all levels."

Openness is the single most effective antidote to this spreading scourge of mistrust.

Open government is so crucial to our nation that the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution establishes freedom of speech and the press.

Sunshine Week is an important observance not only for journalists, but also for the public.

Information energizes people to participate in democracy and propels them to vote at all levels of government — local, state and national.

Lack of trust threatens to envelop us in apathy and cynicism.

Openness is a remedy to restore public vigor and enthusiasm for the democratic process.