

Springfield  
News Leader  
Springfield, MO  
Circ. 65973  
From Page:  
8  
3/31/2009  
17284



800

# Secrecy helps lead to audits

## Auditor finds thread in taxpayers' distrust, Sunshine violations.

### OUR VOICE

This editorial is the view of the News-Leader Editorial Board.

Sometimes, taxpayers simply do not trust local officials.

OK, so you realize that. No surprise there.

What you might not realize, however, is that growing numbers of distrustful citizens are doing more than griping.

At an increasing rate, local residents have been organizing petition drives and pressing the state's fiscal watchdog into service. Wary they're not getting the straight scoop from local officials, taxpayers push for audits.

Susan Montee, the state's auditor, cited the trend in a recent speech to media representatives from across Missouri.

Yearly from 2005 to 2007, the auditor's office averaged 14 petitions from residents for special audits of local governments. In 2008, that number rose to 26.

Montee calls it "a huge increase" and she concludes the uptick stems from taxpayer dissatisfaction.



Montee

She also goes further. In an interview with the Associated Press, Montee offered this intriguing opinion: "We always find Sunshine (Law) violations in these areas," Montee told the AP. "It's a common thread: If you're not being open in your little city and people don't know what's going on, they will think you're doing something wrong."

Secrecy helped spur the audit that's expected to start soon in Christian County. You might have read in this space in past

months the many claims of violations of open meeting and records laws in the county, spurred mostly by the aggressive questioning of activist Ernie O'Gaffney.

We also believe secrecy helped lead to similar distrust — and audits — across the state, including parts of the Ozarks.

Once called in, Montee's staffers invariably find inadequate meeting minutes, questions about proper notice for meetings and sometimes no minutes at all — even though state law makes it clear they must be kept.

It's sad to see audits threatened so often. But, some public officials simply do not seem to understand that while doing the public's business they must comply with the Sunshine Law.

Montee said many times the distrust starts with little problems, like the cost of copies of minutes, or a delay in providing them.

We understand that producing records requested by citizens — as well as us in the media — can sometimes be time consuming. But, we're also convinced that a government body that goes out of its way to help constituents understand issues can solve problems more handily, answer questions more believably and create policy more effectively.

All that without the state's intervention — and the cost of an special audit.

We hope that message is becoming more clear across the Ozarks — and that the big stick of the audit is wielded less frequently in 2009.