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Report illuminates Sunshine Law

Dear Boonville,
I want to credit mid-Missouri resident Theresa Krebs with writing a recent Internet report about the Boonville Daily News that underscores a fundamental truth of journalism: It mandates that its practitioners act as watchdogs by using such tools as the Missouri Sunshine Law.

That law, as those of you who regularly read this editorial know, enables all Missouri citizens to access information about the work of public government.

Walter Williams, the BDN alumnus who went on to become the father of the MU School of Journalism, wrote: "I believe that clear thinking and clear statement, accuracy and fairness are fundamental to good journalism."

How is the journalist to think clearly and make clear statements unless he has the tools with which to do it?

Indeed, he cannot.

This is why public records are so fundamental. They let us peer at a cross-section of people as they really are, in their own words. I say cross-section because it is impossible to piece together a portrait of the truth using documents alone. But just as a receipt details the purchases you make at the grocery store, so too does a document that you have written — an e-mail, perhaps, or a letter — detail your thoughts, your directives, your routine conversations.

Lest you think of me as a crazy bat — and I assure you, I sometimes worry that the call of the cave is closer than I might wish — note the words of Ian

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Marquand, chairman of the Freedom of Information Committee for the Society of Professional Journalists. In an introduction to a series of articles about obtaining



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government records, Marquand wrote:

“There’s no question that Freedom of Information — the right of Americans to have access to government

records and meetings — is one of the most important concepts of democracy in the United States. There’s also no question that FOI is one of the most important areas of interest for journalists and journalism organizations, as well as for other First Amendment advocates.”

In fact, the mission statement of the journalists society — which has existed in some form since 1909 — states that it is a journalist’s duty to provide information to people “in an accurate, comprehensive, timely and understandable manner.”

Again: How can the journalist present as comprehensive a picture of the truth as possible unless he has the information with which to do it?

Without question, access to records by and about public officials has been a cornerstone of journalism for decades. Consider just two examples:

— Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein used public records to document the Watergate scandal. Their reporting was followed by the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

— The Springfield News-Leader and other media used public records to

document concerns over E. coli levels at the Lake of the Ozarks, resulting in changes at the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

These, of course, were large-scale reports that covered months — years, even. One valuable thing about requests for public records is that they can be used for these kinds of reporting projects but also for articles that appear on a single day and are finished.

As Krebs pointed out in her article, Sunshine Law requests can’t always be processed in a single day. They take time, and the law provides for that. Boonville’s city officials should be commended for taking Missouri law seriously, and the time they have spent to make sure that the public has access to the city’s records should not — must not — be overlooked.

Let me also be clear that while the Sunshine Law allows members of the public to request a waiver of fees to access records, it by no means precludes city officials from charging for their time. In fact, “payment of such copying fees may be requested prior to the making of copies,” according to Chapter 610.026.2(2) of the Missouri Revised Statutes.

We can be thankful that there are officials in our community who value the public interest and the First Amendment.

For the sake of our republic, let us share their attitude.

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