

Springfield  
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# MSU <sup>800</sup> audit redactions smack of overkill

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

Erring on the side of openness isn't just  
a goal or nice idea — it is also the law.

Take a close look at the photograph to the right of this editorial.

These three pages are supposed to be public records. The law says they must be released to citizens or the media upon request.

They are part of final audit reports that are supposed to give

about it, and we make this public call for the university to do more information sharing and

less redacting when it comes to important documents like these.

Though the state Sunshine Law specifically identifies final audit reports as public records,

details of three different investigations into how money was handled at Missouri State University, a public institution supported by your tax dollars.

But, as you can see, many details are not public in these records. They are blacked out.

Lots of words are missing. Full paragraphs got the bold marker treatment. Even the

what MSU has released to us in these three cases are very much partial records. The redacting, as you can tell from the photograph (go to this story online to see everything that

names of academic departments at the university that were investigated have been hidden from public view.

The university says it has the right to do that extreme editing.

But it smacks of overkill to us.

We think you should know about it and

was redacted) makes it very difficult to make sense of the investigations.

And, in our view, it flies in the face of a very important point



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in the state Sunshine Law — the section under the heading: “Liberal construction of the law to be public policy.”

That section states, very directly, that parts of the law requiring openness should be “liberally construed.” Parts allowing the withholding of records should be “strictly construed.”

From our careful look at these internal audits by reporter Didi Tang, and our experience

with other such audits from Springfield, the state Auditor’s Office and even previously from MSU, whoever blacked out sections of these audits did not err on the side of openness.

In trying to justify the editing,

MSU says it applied legal exemptions to the release of records regarding “discipline of an employ-

ee” and litigation or confidential communications with a lawyer.

Obviously, we understand how MSU might have to draw a lawyer into investigations into how money was spent, especially if questions arise about employees holding the purse strings. But this exemption is supposed to be applied, again, in a very limited fashion, “strictly construed.”

If any record that can be tied to a discussion with a lawyer is excludable, MSU might want to start buying its black, bold markers by the gross.

The audits that were delivered to us with the heavy redactions were done by MSU’s Internal Auditing Department.

Despite the markups, the documents helped Tang — after hours and hours of cross-checking other records and interviewing sources to try to get

past the redactions — produce three recent stories. Their headlines were: “Audit: Travel policies violated,” “MSU adds new policies for tickets,” and “Audit places MSU expenditures under scrutiny.”

It’s obvious from those headlines that internal audits like these can help institutions, government bodies and businesses unearth problems before they get out of hand, or extremely expensive. (The city of Springfield decided to hire such an auditor after the high-profile thefts at Municipal Court.)

Such audits, involving special investigations by bookkeeping sleuths, help uncover flaws in accounting procedures, expose weak financial controls or, in

some cases, determine why money is missing.

These kind of audits, in our view, can be even more effective as a check on government

activities when taxpayers — as well as the employees within an audited entity — can view them, too.

Internal audits are not performance reviews, paperwork connected to a lawsuit or confidential notes from attorneys.

The state legislature determined they were to be open records for a reason. We hope MSU respects that reasoning to a greater degree in the future.

Erring on the side of openness isn’t just a goal, a nice idea or a theory.

It’s the law.

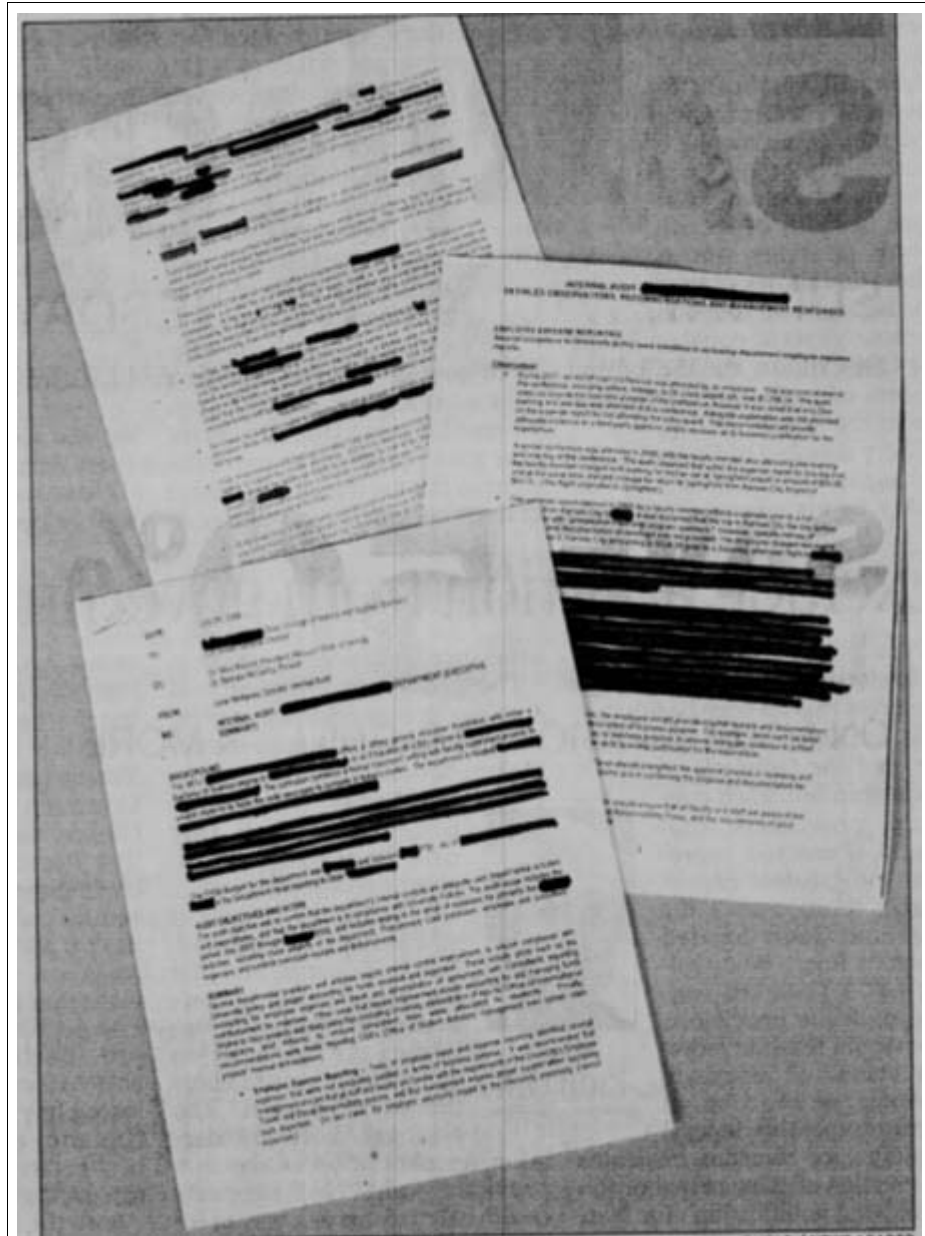
It shouldn’t be avoided. It shouldn’t be ignored. And it shouldn’t be redacted.



**Read:** Stories about the MSU audit by clicking on this editorial at [www.news-leader.com](http://www.news-leader.com)



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**Pages of public records** of final audit reports at Missouri State University were heavily edited before being released to our reporter.