

Rolla Daily
News
Rolla, MO
Circ. 4920
From Page:
2
7/28/2009
18257



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Sunshine Law seminar



Approximately 50 county and municipal government officials, board members, citizens and reporters turned out Thursday evening for training on laws associated with Missouri's Sunshine Law. The event was sponsored by the Phelps County Commission at the courthouse, and Public Education Director Tom Durkin, with Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster's office, conducted the training. County Clerk Carol Bennett, left, Presiding Commissioner Randy Verkamp, Durkin, Commissioner Bud Dean and Commissioner Larry Stratman greeted meeting attendees upon their arrival, while President of the St. James Fire Protection District, John Smallwood, signs in. PHOTO BY JENNIFER HEFLIN

Rolla Daily
News
Rolla, MO
Circ. 4920
From Page:
1
7/27/2009
18257



PHELPS COUNTY
241-800
**Area
officials
attend
session**

Sunshine Law
gathering attracts
about 50 leaders

Jennifer Heflin
Daily News Staff

A group of about 50 people from local city and county government offices attended a training session taught by Tom Durkin, Public Education Director from Attorney General Chris Koster office.

Durkin commented on the attendance and cooperation of Phelps County in comparison with the rest of the state.

"This is good a turn out as I've ever had in a county," said Durkin.

Durkin said he was impressed at how quickly his office received a letter from Phelps County extending an invitation to hold the training meeting, after it was announced.

"After the letter, we received a phone call saying the same," he said. "Phelps County was one of the first."

Durkin also stated as he was preparing for the trip to Phelps County, he looked in his files to see how many inquiries came from Phelps County. To his surprise, his Phelps County file folder was empty.

"No inquiries from Phelps County," Durkin stated, "I can't say that about all of them."

Among the officials attending were Commis-

sioners Randy Verkamp, Bud Dean, Larry Stratman, County Administrator Kathy Oliver, Circuit Court Clerk Sue Brown and Rolla Mayor William Jenks. Others came from as far away as Crawford County to better understand the law.

Durkin's main priority is to go to all 114 counties in the state and educate public officials what is and is not legally allowed during meetings.

Durkin's office receives 10-12 inquiries daily, from around the state, requesting they look into practices of a body of government. Questions such as "can this body go into a closed meeting without posting it is to be closed first?" With each inquiry Durkin explains why it is or is not allowed to happen the way it has.

Documentation is essential according to Durkin. The documenta-

See **SUNSHINE 10**





Rolla Daily
 News
 Rolla, MO
 Circ. 4920
 From Page:
 10
 7/27/2009
 18257



SUNSHINE

Continued from Page 1

tion can then be reviewed by the governing bodies to succeed the current one.

"It is a kind of road map for new officials," Durkin explained.

This, however, does not mean the public can not look at records. Durkin explained unless a session is closed, all the records from the meetings are open to the public.

"They are our records, and we are entitled to look at them." Durkin went on to say, "Openness is at the foundation of the law."

There are reasons, stated clearly, to close a session. In planning a closed-session meeting, the reason for the meeting being closed must be listed on the meeting announcement, along with the

provision which allows it to remain closed. Once a session is closed, the records remain closed unless and until the governmental body decides to open the records. However, once records are open, they cannot be closed again.

Durkin also explained a rule of thumb for people to follow is: "When in doubt, it is open." Advising when governmental officials act sneaky, they usually are trying to be. When officials act very open about the meet-

ings they are holding, they are not trying to hide anything.

After all, the law is meant to keep the government transparent.

"Keep in mind, it is not about you. It is about your constituents." Durkin reminded everyone, "Remember who you are serving."