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800 Sunshine Law at issue as city talks of e-mail

Web coordinator to seek solution that appeases council.

By Kary Booher
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City Hall is close to launching a redesigned Web site, but City Council members pressed Tuesday for highly visible e-mail addresses that could expedite their communication with citizens.

It's not that simple, City Clerk Brenda Cirtin told the city's elected leaders.



Cirtin

"We do not want to take a chance on violating the Sunshine Law," Cirtin said.

At a lunchtime session designed to highlight City Hall's efforts to enhance public communication, the city's public information office also announced a Twitter-like communication site in which updates could quickly reach thousands of residents.

But much discussion led to the display of the council's city-run e-mail address.

Cirtin had to temper the enthusiasm of several council members. She explained that e-mail correspondence — particularly when one e-mail is sent to several council members — needs to be on record in her office.

State law requires e-mail be on record with the custodian of records, or her office, in the event that an e-mail is sent to several other council members, creating a quorum.

Because some Springfield council committees consist of only four council

Many have generated a heavy volume of e-mails.

Council members Scott Bailes, John Rush and Mayor Jim O'Neal pushed for better display.

"We don't want to violate the Sunshine Law," O'Neal said. "But the way we're doing it kind of creates this image of a barrier. That's been brought to my attention more than once."



O'Neal

The city's Web coordinator, Chris Akins, said after Tuesday's meeting that city staff will try to accommodate the council and expressed confidence that a solution would be found so that e-mails are also on file with the clerk's office.

An e-mail could be directed to the clerk's office even if the writer types in only one address, he said.

"Technically, there are a variety of ways that it can be done," Akins said. "The back end of our e-mail system is handled by the IS (information systems) department. We discussed it briefly after the meeting. It's definitely something we'll look at improving."

Meanwhile, city spokeswoman Louise Whall announced that the the city and Greene County have launched a new Web-based community information service, Nixle.com, which is free for the city and subscribers.



Whall

City departments will post updates that can be viewed on the site, much like Twitter — and also will link with that social networking site.





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members, an e-mail sent to three would create a quorum.

So the city follows that rule for all e-mail communication, Cirtin explained in a later interview.

As it is, an e-mail first is sent to the clerk's office, then sent on to council members.

"That's only because we're trying to go the extra mile," Cirtin said.

Discussion about that issue came on the heels of a number of controversial issues — including the 60/65 Partnership proposal — that have come before the council in recent weeks.

It will offer road construction updates, police information, emergency management and public safety alerts and health advisories, to name a few.

Citizens who already subscribe to Twitter can receive Nixle updates by following these Twitter accounts: twitter.com/cityofsgf; twitter.com/sgchd; and twitter.com/gcoem.

"We feel like it's a very legitimate source of information," said Whall, director of the city's public information office.

Whall expects the new redesigned Web site to be on display within a week.