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Meeting Held for Sunshine Law

By Josh Golightly
Public officials gained knowledge about the state's open meetings and records law Tuesday afternoon in a meeting held by the Missouri Attorney General's office.

Public education director, Tom Durkin, led the forum in front of members from various county offices.

Among those in attendance included East Prairie Mayor Clinton Wolford, Presiding County Commissioner Jim Blumenberg, East Prairie Administrator Lonnie

Thurmond, East Prairie City Clerk Lori Lemons, East Prairie School's Superintendent Scott Downing, along with various county officials from the health department, water district and others.

Durkin explained a vastly unknown law referred to as the Sunshine Law. He construed various aspects of the law, including records requests, posting meetings for public viewing and the appropriate times for holding closed meetings.

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Durkin put emphasis on recognizing, and interpreting the law, as it has loose ends and is easily misinterpreted.

A meeting may be closed due to legal issues, the leasing, purchase or sale of real estate, as well as the hiring, firing, disciplining or promoting employees, according to the law.

As to avoid confusion on closed meetings Durkin comments, "when in doubt, it's open."

According to the law, agendas should be posted 24 hours in advance, except in emergency cases, which is explained in article 610.015.

The public also has the right to audiotape and video tape all public meetings, so long as it is "unobtrusive."

Durkin said that after the public makes a records request, governmental bodies have no more than three days to respond.

"Compliance simply

means you respond," he said, adding that it does not necessarily mean giving up documents.

Durkin said that the public eye is always on county officials.

"The public's perception of us is their reality," Durkin said.

He also said that those who violate the law could be subject to pay up to a \$1,000 fine and for a purposeful violation, a body would pay up to a \$5,000 fine, as well as attorney fees.

For more information on Missouri's Sunshine law, visit the Missouri Attorney General's Web site: <http://ago.mo.gov/Open-Government.htm>.