

It's the 'we' in 'we the people'

Many of you access government open records on a regular basis, maybe without even knowing it.

Your teen has a fender bender, and you stop by the police department to get a copy of the accident report. You need to get your vehicle license renewed and you can't find the document that says you've paid your property taxes. Or, you missed the latest school board meeting, so you pick up a copy of the minutes.

State and federal laws give you the right to these records and thousands of others. But mention the Sunshine Law, and people automatically think of it as something especially created for the news media.

Just the opposite, folks. Open records and open meeting laws, to my way of thinking, are what really put the "we" in "we the people." Government operates on your dime and you own its information. Yes, you might have to pay for copies, and in some cases you have to pay a clerk if he or she spends a lot of time searching for your request, but ultimately the law says those records are yours.

We take our rights to records for granted until, of course, someone puts up a

roadblock. The Globe has encountered such a roadblock in its attempt to access e-mail correspondence to and from Missouri Southern State University e-mail accounts from top university officials.

During the month of August we asked twice for electronic correspondence, which under the law is considered public record using the basic definition of a public governmental body, which is a governmental entity created by statute.

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Clearly Missouri Southern falls into that category. What is unfortunate now is that we have had to involve an attorney in our pursuit of the records.

So, what do we hope to gain here? Hopefully, some insight into allegations of turmoil at the top at

MSSU. Last week we published a story detailing a faculty senate meeting where the group voted 23-2 to form an ad hoc committee. That committee will be charged with determining whether and how to call for a vote of no confidence in the school's president, Bruce Speck.

The committee is also supposed to detail faculty grievances.

You've seen a lot of "no comments" and

details about phone calls that have gone unreturned. Most of those who have been willing to talk with us will do so only off the record.

We believe the e-mail records could shine light on a university that has become extremely tight-lipped to say the least.

We made e-mail requests of Joplin city officials last year when there were allegations made against Jon Tupper, a former mayor and city council member. Those e-mails provided details to the public. The details ultimately forced the City Council to decide that Tupper had violated the city charter and the city's ethics code, and he was ousted.

E-mails of city officials were also accessed several years ago when an 11-year-old Joplin boy was handcuffed at a Joplin school by an off-duty police officer. Those documents, obtained without having to hire an attorney, were used as part of a reporter's investigation.

We ask for these records, not for purposes of a witch hunt, but because we believe they belong to you.

Joe Public deserves more.

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