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Editorial

Excellent Sunshine program

The Missouri Attorney General's Office presented an excellent program on Missouri's Sunshine Law last Tuesday night at the care center in Hermitage. The speaker was exceptionally good, with excellent information and copies of the state law by which all governmental agencies are regulated.

The only problem was that the people for which the program was designed were noticeably absent. The program should have included the attendance of at least all the area city clerks, school board secretaries, public board secretaries and representatives of all the elected county officials. None of them attended except the county commissioners.

The program would have been valuable for all the elected and appointed city officials, the health board members, the library board members, the water district board members and the school board members. None attended. In defense of school board members, we should note that they are required by law to receive special training shortly after being elected, so they are exposed to some rudimentary training in this law.

City elected officials often depend upon the counsel of their attorneys who quite often are not well versed in this law. So this would have been a great chance for mayors and aldermen to get a thimbleful of information in an ocean of regulations to which they must comply.

Most of the people impacted by the Sunshine Law serve in non-paying board positions. And sometimes their uncertainty about this law causes them to err on the side of caution while the law is designed to promote openness in government operations. The law emphasizes that meetings, records and deliberations should be as open as possible and that exceptions should be very limited. The exact wording of the law says: "It is the public policy of this state that

meetings, records, votes, actions and deliberations of public governmental bodies be open to the public unless otherwise provided by law. Sections 610.010 to 610.200 shall be liberally construed and their exceptions strictly construed to promote this public policy."

Here at The Index we work with a multitude of boards and public agencies, and we see that for the most part they are trying to comply with this law. These people don't willfully and knowingly violate the Sunshine Law, but we see many, many examples of failure to comply with the law. That's why this meeting would have been so valuable to these agencies and to their boards and to their office personnel.

Every month the Missouri Press Association newsletter includes information about the Sunshine Law, about new rulings on the law and about new interpretations of the law. We study this law as much as anyone in the county, and still we found last week's program to be informational and enlightening. To someone with just a vague idea of what it is about, this could have been something close to an information epiphany. But county officials, city officials, board representatives and their secretaries all missed it. We commend Attorney General Chris Koster for adding the public education position and for taking this program on the Sunshine Law to every county in the state.

The law is called the Sunshine Law for a reason, and that reason is to keep public officials from acting in the shadows of secrecy and confidentiality. Good government requires public servants to keep the citizens and taxpayers informed about actions that affect the voters, the citizens and their tax dollars. Too bad that so many people missed this important ray of sunshine designed to help both the public servants and the public.