

A 'Sunshine Hero' is remembered

Tom Schweich understood the importance of government transparency

By the time this month's column hits mailboxes, a full month will have passed since Tom Schweich's death. Last month's magazine containing his photo from Missouri Press' Day at the Capital arrived on my desk the day of his funeral.

Still, closure mandates a moment of recognition for what he did in the name of ethics in government. As state auditor, he focused on wrongful acts done by those in government seats of power. He rooted out instances where public funds were not being used in a judicious manner. He found fraud. He denounced corruption. He recommended change for the better.

He was a thorn in the side of many officials. But he understood well the role that transparency plays in good government. As he reminded Missouri Press members repeatedly, he was a fan of the Sunshine Law.

More than once I heard him thank the Missouri Sunshine Coalition for giving him its Sunshine Hero award several years

ago. It always made this board member a little sheepish because that award is often an afterthought. I'm sure many of the recipients of it over the years have their plaques shoved into a dark corner in a closet somewhere. I doubt some of them even remember receiving it. But Schweich remembered and he would speak of it repeatedly with pride.

He also would note with pride how many of his audits pointed out Sunshine Law violations by public bodies. There are probably good odds his office educated as many public officials about the nuances of the law as the Attorney Generals' office does, and



certainly in a very public way.

Long ago, I began speaking about the need for prosecution to arise from the violations the state auditor finds, but that never happened. However, Schweich's policy of doing a second audit a short time later might have accomplished much the same goal in a less aggressive way. Any change in habits by public bodies of their sunshine policies can only be seen as a beneficial step.

In fact, Schweich, at times, would celebrate Sunshine Week by releasing a summary of recent audits in his office that found sunshine law violations.

In 2012, for example, he released a summary of all the Sunshine Law violations noted by his of-

fice during the past two years. He said nearly 20 percent of the audits his office conducted contained at least one violation of the Sunshine Law.

I sorely missed hearing an announcement like that from the State Auditor's office this year.

Schweich had a clear vision that there is no place for dishonest activity among those working for public governmental bodies.

He believed citizens had a right to full transparency by those who serve them. His belief in the Sunshine Law was part of his larger mandate for honest, effective public administration. He lived his Sunshine Law beliefs in a way many of

us never get a chance to do.

I recall one night at a gathering, Schweich caught me and, in his usual manner, started talking "a mile a minute" about several activities he had in the works relating to sunshine audits. After a number of minutes had passed, I began feeling somewhat trapped. He could be overwhelming in his enthusiasm about his work.

His enthusiasm was a reflection of his belief in the principles that drove his life. Sen. John Danforth talked about Schweich always "taking the high road."

In the end, perhaps Schweich's pointed focus on people doing what is right led to his downfall, but he certainly was a breath of fresh air in government.

I, for one, will miss being "cornered" by the man. I thank him for his public service during the years on behalf of Missouri's Sunshine Law and I doubt I will see anyone else with his focused integrity in government during my lifetime.

Sen. John Danforth's call in his homily at Schweich's funeral for dignity in politics is a call also for respect for all Schweich fought for, and that includes honesty and transparency in government.

Our state indeed lost a good man and a hero in every way.



Tom Schweich

"His enthusiasm was a reflection of his belief in the principles that drove his life."