

## Many bills filed relate to open records, meetings



### Shield law again being proposed

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We are in the midst of the legislative session in Missouri.

By the time you read this column, Rep. Tim Jones should have on file both a sunshine law amendment bill and a shield law bill, both drafted with the assistance and input of the Missouri Press Association.

First, we thank Rep. Jones for his work on these measures. Last year he nearly brought the shield law to reality. He has worked tirelessly on these measures in the past and we appreciate his interest in our concerns again this year.

The number of bills that has been filed that relate to the sunshine law and open meetings/open records is amazing to me. This is clearly going to be a topic of much discussion in Jefferson City this session. Whether a bill will pass is of course another story. On one hand, one might think with all these bills that some major sunshine law revisions by the end of the session are inevitable. But still, the legislative process grinds slowly and some are forecasting that the grinding will come to a sluggish halt before the session is over and that nothing of significance on this issue, and many others, will be forthcoming.

This is the third year, however, for the shield law bill. Perhaps the third time is the charm.

Each of you plays an important part in this process, of course. Many of you are on the e-mail chain and receive a heads-up when a bill is moving. If you receive those messages, know how important it is to me and to others at Missouri Press that you make contact with your legislators and let them know that their votes are important to you.

I cannot tell you how many times I get calls from you and your staff complaining about sunshine law problems.

Making some of the changes we have suggested, even if just a few pass, can only benefit us. This has been a year when the sunshine law has received more attention than it has in the past 15-plus years I've served as the hotline attorney. I've never before seen it become such an issue of high importance in state government. So I'm hopeful we'll see some significant changes before the session is done. I'm counting on your help in making this happen.

Meanwhile, I spend a little of my time following bills that other groups are supporting. One of my favorite organizations to watch is the Missouri Municipal League. You can guess why. And I've been amazed this year by one item I've seen repeatedly from them. When they send out a notice about a sunshine law bill that is filed, their description of the bill (generally on opening records) always states that they are opposed to the bill because of "policy."

What do you suppose that means? Does the Missouri Municipal League have a policy opposing openness in government? Does the Missouri Municipal League have a policy opposing public access to information? Are your city's tax dollars being used to support an organization that has as a standing policy of opposition to openness in government in whatever fashion it presents itself?

I challenge you to make an effort to tell your local residents that their tax dollars are being used for this purpose. Surely someone besides me finds that offensive.

Last, I want to note a final concern I have in relation to the February shootings in Kirkwood City Hall. All of us at Missouri Press express our sympathy to the families of those killed and injured in this tragedy.

What worries me is whether the end result of instances like this will be efforts to make public meetings less open to the public. A knee-jerk reaction to such an incident is to close the facility to the public. But that does not guarantee personal safety. What happened inside the hall could just as easily have happened outside in the parking lot as councilpersons walked into the building for the meeting.

What happened did not happen because a public meeting was held. It happened because one person who was mentally disturbed chose to take the actions he took. I trust those looking for solutions to the problem understand that difference.