

# Politics trump need in Missouri legislature

## Boost in records fee mocks sunshine law

The legislative session is over, and once again your elected representatives chose to focus on other issues, ignoring the need for significant changes in our state sunshine law. Well, except for the fact that government interests pressured them to extend the sunset provision on two of the exceptions to open records in the law.

This time of year, one has a hard time not being cynical about the state of state government in Missouri. Legislators are elected to represent you, the voters. They are in Jeff City to work for better government for citizens in the state.

At the end of the session, each side issues edicts talking about the results of the session. Pick one from each party, any one, and read them. It sounds like you are reading about two different legislatures and two different results of the session. One side says it was wonderful and many changes were made benefiting citizens. The other side says none of the worthwhile bills were passed.

I'm just unhappy we have been unable in the last few years to convince this Republican-dominated legislature that changes to the sunshine law are needed. It is interesting to ponder the fact that under a Democratic-controlled legislature, even with a Republican sponsor (Sarah Steelman), we were able to make some needed changes to the law.

Under this legislature, we could have found Democrats willing to sponsor a bill, but were counseled that bills with a Democratic sponsor would not move. So we found Republican sponsors, but in the end, they didn't make any more progress than we would have had

if we had gone the other way.

Surely Republicans believe in transparency in government. I was astounded last winter with all the furor over access to e-mails and believed that it was likely that electronic mail would generate a heavy discussion from our legislators.

Last November, Gov. Matt Blunt directed that all e-mails in his office be retained forever. And he created a permanent email archive system. Major changes were made to accommodate these policy directives. But the reality is that six months later, we see little actual reform in state government.

Various state leaders are demanding other state leaders turn over their e-mails. Money is being spent on retrieving and reviewing these e-mails to see if they comply with the request. Every time stories run about these situations, the sunshine law loses



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some of its glimmer. At times, it seems like a joke.

And you, out in the trenches fighting daily to gain access to local records, see the effect of this situation. Officials deny access to records and assume that no one can fight them to overturn their blatantly wrong decisions.

On the state level, the Missouri Department of Revenue decides to fund its new computer system by increasing the charge for access to its electronic record database. State law says it can only charge for the cost of a copy of the electronic record base and its staff time to make the copy.

Documents it released under a sunshine law request show Revenue is crunching numbers that include adding the cost for a share of the legal services division time, the fiscal services division time, the actual license plate cost, professional services, office equipment, computer and other equipment, postage, professional development, and, astoundingly, for a share of the rent and utilities for the Truman Building offices.

Actions like this make the sunshine law a mockery. A state agency should not be engaging in such activity. State legislators, who are given the job of improving the operations of state government, are shirking their duties when they spend five months in Jeff City and accomplish more on the last day than they did in the 120 days prior to that date.

When a bill's success depends on which party is handling it, our legislature has failed miserably.

## 2 from *Columbia Daily Tribune* visit Ukraine to teach news management

Managing editor Jim Robertson and web editor David Farre of the *Columbia Daily Tribune* visited April 11-19 at the newspaper *Molodyy Bukovynetsin* in Chernivtsi, Ukraine.

The program, sponsored by the International Research & Exchanges Board and funded by the Media Development Fund of the U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, matches U.S. newspapers with Ukrainian partners for training of journalists in the former Soviet republic's emerging free-press environment.

Aided by interpreters, Robertson and Farre led sessions on newsroom organization and management, story development and selection, website development and other newsroom topics.

As part of the program, two Ukrainian journalists from *Molodyy Bukovynetsin* will visit the *Tribune* for a week in June. In September, members of the *Tribune* marketing and advertising departments will participate in another exchange with the same Ukrainian newspaper.