

Sunshine increases in the NRW

The sun shines a little more brightly on government in the New River Valley since last year. Local governments have opened themselves to greater public scrutiny, and where they refused, some ambitious citizens have forced them to do it.

Sunshine Week kicks off today. Journalists around the country will remind readers, listeners and watchers why open government is important.

As if most people need reminding that representative democracy relies on citizen access to official meetings and records. Without knowing what elected officials do, the people cannot make informed decisions on Election Day. That's basic civics.

No, the more important reminding this week is for elected officials who too often choose shadows. Officials like Christiansburg's Del Dave Nutter, who again pushed secrecy in the General Assembly this year, and Sen. John Edwards, whose district includes the northern half of the New River Valley and who convinced his fellow lawmakers to hide informa-

tion from citizens.

Local officials have done a much better job during the last 12 months.

Christiansburg shines especially brightly. The town's Web site a year ago was a wasteland nearly devoid of useful content.

A couple of months ago, the town finally launched a new site. For the first time, residents have easy access to town council agendas and minutes, not to mention the town code and charter. As long as the town does not let this site stagnate, it will be an excellent portal for citizen engagement.

The town also is doing a much better job of sending out agendas in a timely manner. The one for Tuesday's meeting went out last Wednesday. That gave people interested in the scheduled rezoning requests and special reports plenty of time to seek further information and prepare to offer informed comments if they attend.



Christian Trejbal
christiantrejbal@roanoke.com
381-1645

Other communities are doing a better job with their agendas, too. Giles, Pulaski and Floyd counties and the town of Pulaski all now post their agendas online in a timely manner.

When it comes to minutes, though, they are a little less consistent. Only Floyd seems capable of letting people who don't attend meetings know what happened.

Most localities could still learn a thing or two, though. They might follow Blacksburg's lead. The town's Web site features audio and video from meetings.

They also might check out Montgomery County's offerings. When the county posts agendas for board of supervisors meetings, it supplies all of the supporting documents. Citizens have access to all of the same information



that supervisors do; there is no need to decipher cryptic agenda items.

Other shadows persist. Almost all local governments abuse their authority to meet in secret to discuss appointments, even appointments to the most innocuous positions. Would it kill Montgomery supervisors to talk in public about who will serve on the parks and recreation board?

Meanwhile, Floyd supervisors continue to find secrecy in plain site. They hold their meetings during inconvenient daytime hours. Most people work and cannot attend. Supervisors have *de facto* closed meetings.

The most exciting sunshine did not come directly from local governments. Rather, it came from the blossoming of serious local blogs.

A few have been around for a while. The Blue Ridge

Muse, for example, has been a watchdog in Floyd for years.

Others are new on the scene. Christiansburg has proven especially fruitful ground. Think, Christiansburg!, DepotDazed and Christiansburg Pet Peeves & Other Stuff have created fresh energy in the town's politics.

Council can get away with little without these citizens and the communities on their blogs scrutinizing it.

The operators of DepotDazed deserve special recognition. Before the town began placing documents online, the blog filed extensive Freedom of Information Act requests and posted what it received.

Now the town has caught up, but the bloggers continue to push. They record audio and video of meetings and post those.

Sunshine in government requires elected officials, administrators and citizens to work together. It is under way in the New River Valley, but it is far from complete.

Trejbal is an editorial writer for The Roanoke Times based in the New River Valley bureau in Christiansburg.

Your thoughts

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