

Today, a spotlight on Florida's Sunshine law BRADENTON HERALD EDITORIAL | Government must be accountable for transparency

“The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”

— Thomas Jefferson, 1787

This nation's Founding Fathers held firm in the belief that a free press should maintain a boundless watch over government to protect democracy from the tyranny of the few.

At the heart of that watchdog role is the perpetual push for open government. The public's right to know how government works trumps arguments in defense of secrecy.

Ultimately, this issue is more about the public than the media, as Jefferson foretold.

Florida boasts one of the nation's strongest transparency laws, known as the Government in the Sunshine law. Today marks the beginning of Sunshine Week, the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors' annual weeklong examination of the critical importance of open government.

The law, enacted in 1967, requires most meetings of government entities large and small be open to the public. It also forbids two or more members of the same board or commission from discussing official business outside open, public meetings.

This year's been especially tough for transparency. Witness the Ray Sansom scandal, one of the most egregious examples of secrecy in generations.

The disgraced former speaker of the Florida House resigned the day before the beginning of a chamber inquiry and still faces a criminal indictment for back-room deals that steered a \$6 million state appropriation toward the construction of an airport building for the benefit of a campaign donor. Allegations include violations of the open meetings law, too.

The case brings to mind a statement from newspaper columnist and dedicated watchdog journalist Jack Anderson:

“The incestuous relationship between government and big business thrives in the dark.”

With the Sansom case shining a spotlight on the need for greater transparency, legislators are pushing a variety of measures.

Barbara Petersen, president of Florida’s First Amendment Foundation, articulates those bills in a commentary below as the Herald Opinion page focuses on open government today.

Last Sunday, we opined on the two measures garnering the most attention: a constitutional amendment proposed by Rep. Keith Fitzgerald, D-Sarasota, and Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach, that would open up the state budget process; and a bill by Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, that would, among other things, require government officials to be trained about the state’s open records and meetings requirements.

That component of Dockery’s bill should have been enacted years ago since violations occur with frightening regularity.

Open records and meetings mandates cover all governments in the state, not just the highest offices.

Far too many elected officials, from homeowner associations and other small entities, remain ignorant of their responsibilities to their electorate.

And far too many show arrogance by articulating the position that they need not follow the law. Personal agendas have no place in public business.

Sunshine law violations are all too common throughout Florida.

Just this month, Bradenton Beach city commissioners dismissed three appointees to city agencies and committees after all three failed to attend an educational seminar on the Sunshine law, this following months of commission patience, the Anna Maria Islander newspaper reported last week.

Bradenton's Trailer Estates and its Board of Trustees remain embroiled in a Sunshine controversy and lawsuit.

Late last year, a judge ordered the city of Venice to pay more than \$775,000 in legal fees over a citizen activist's open government lawsuit. Venice's own legal bills amounted to more than \$600,000.

When governments violate the law, taxpayers get stuck with the bill.

Citizens must demand government transparency and accountability, as open meetings and open records are vital to a healthy democracy.