

Let your voice be heard on how money is spent

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The new year is here, and soon the Missouri legislature will be back in session. The state's budget will be on the agenda for discussion, of course. So will many other important issues, including some sunshine law proposals.

Every year I think perhaps this will be a year when open government will be more than empty words coming out of legislators' mouths. (I imagine each of you has a local legislator who has told you they believe in open government.)

But the rubber hits the road when the vote comes. Last year we did have an incredible show of support from the House of Representatives on the sunshine law bill. The problem always arises when special interest groups attempt to put baggage on the bill. And one of the biggest pieces of baggage that I fear we'll see again this year is the effort by law enforcement to close internal affairs investigative records.

The argument against opening those is that when accusations are made against good cops, the results of those investigations should not be made public. But we hold law enforcement in a special place of privilege in this country. We allow them rights that no ordinary citizen has, and in return, we expect those who wear the badge to operate in the highest spheres of honesty and integrity.

When accusations are made against a cop, the public (who is the employer, you'll remember) should be allowed to know the outcome of those investigations. There is no valid reason for a cop refusing to make all the actions taken in his or her performance of duties open for public scrutiny.

Indeed, an investigation in St. Louis recently of cops who purloined scalped sports event tickets and allowed family and friends to use them is exactly what I'm talking about. A citizen asked for access to the investigative reports. Almost 1,000 days had passed and the citizen

waited for a judge to enter an order allowing him access to the reports the cops basically suggested would be pried from their cold, dead hands and no other way.

Why should law enforcement think it is good business to cover up anything that relates to enforcement of the law and the record of their employees?

Missouri Press Association has been asked in the past to consent to some provisions closing records in order to protect the

safety of cops and their families – information on home addresses and such – and where there was a justification with minimal harm to the openness of government, your association has cooperated. But we will not cooperate when what they want to close are reports or complaints about performance of duties where the public's tax dollars are paying the bill.

And to take this discussion one step further, we have an ongoing problem in the state with public tax revenue being spent for lobbying efforts to close public

(A shameless plug: If you haven't done so, go to the MPA website mopress.com/Podcasts.php and listen to December's entry, in which Harry Gallagher, who lobbies for MPA, talks with me about the legislative process. It's very educational!)



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records. Some of the tax dollars you pay to your city and your county are sent by your city council and your county commission to organizations that use those funds to support fights in the legislature to close public records.

Is that what you want your tax dollars to be spent to accomplish? Those of us who write for the public about how their tax dollars are spent need to make a bigger issue out of this fact. Groups like the Missouri Municipal League and the Missouri Association of Counties exist primarily on the member dues they receive from your cities and your counties. Some of that tax money often is spent on political agendas that go against the very people paying those taxes.

For example, The Missouri Citizens for Property Rights, seeking to put constitutional amendments on the ballot to limit the use of eminent domain – where the government arbitrarily takes private property for public use – are now accusing the Missouri Municipal League of filing an appeal of a court judgment “with the main objective being to delay the gathering of signatures,” thus bogging down the ballot initiative.

Why do these state organizations ever do anything other than provide educational services to their constituents – local and county organizations – with your tax dollars?

Taxpayer resources should never be used to advocate or block a public policy measure. And they should never be used to advocate against public access to public information. Never!

If you haven't recently spoken on this issue, I urge you to take the opportunity in the next few weeks to editorialize on it. The start of the legislative session this month and Sunshine Week in March will provide opportunities for you to make your voice heard on a local level.

Thanks for everything you do to support MPA and the Sunshine Law.

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