

NMFOG celebrates Sunshine Week

Written by By Melanie J. Majors Executive Director New Mexico Foundation for Open Government
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Democracy depends on a transparent government, yet despite the New Mexico Inspection of Public Records Act and the Open Meetings Act - laws ensuring the public's right to learn about their government through access to public records and public meetings - some government officials still regularly ignore the law.

As the nation celebrates Sunshine Week, a national initiative to educate the public about the importance of open government and the dangers of secrecy, the New Mexico Foundation for Open Government wants every New Mexican to remember that open, accountable government is the cornerstone of our democracy.

The Sunshine Week celebration coincides with the birthday of James Madison, fourth president of the United States and a father of the U.S. Constitution. Madison was a key proponent of the Bill of Rights and the five rights the First Amendment protects - speech, press, assembly, religion and petition of our government.

One of the most important ideas that underpin the First Amendment is the ability to criticize the government and our public officials. How can we criticize or evaluate government actions if we don't have access to meetings or records?

In the Legislative session that just ended, one of the most vital pieces of business [that] was enacted, mostly occurred behind closed doors - the creation of the state's budget - the taxpayer's money.

To quote the senate and house joint rules book, "There is no more important task for the

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legislature than to devise a budget and allocate the state's resources."

Yet historically many of those budgetary meetings have occurred behind closed doors, shutting out not only the public, but even legislators from the process. One representative pointed out that influential and top-secret meetings sometimes even exclude other finance committee members.

This is just one example of secrecy. Why is it necessary? Lawmakers and elected officials should be eager, not afraid, to have their constituents view the hard choices that need to be made among competing interests. Openness may breed disappointment about the final decision, but it also breeds trust in government and the democratic process.

Tax dollars fund government and New Mexicans have the right to see what city, county, school, village, and state officials see. Public documents are the public's business - from court files to police reports to lists of those who apply for fishing licenses. And, New Mexicans have the right to attend public meetings, even the ones classified as workshops or retreats.

This Sunshine Week pledge [is] to commit to letting the sun in and remind public officials to be respectful of IPRA and OMA. Keep pushing for more access to records, meetings and legislative committees. Consider joining FOG in our mission of protecting your right to know. Help us address your issues or questions when trying to access information from a governmental entity. Let us know if you have concerns about government and join us in making sure everyone follows our state's transparency laws, among the strongest in the nation.

Catch some sunlight this week and together, we can bring 365 days of sunshine to New Mexico. Open government is good government.

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