



This week is the third annual Sunshine Week. It was created to highlight the importance of open government and freedom of information.

Government, at the local, state and federal level, controls an ever increasing portion of our lives. It demands significant financial payments (taxes) at the pain of imprisonment and/or loss of property. In many cases, it controls how we can use our own property (zoning) and what kind of home we can build. There are literally hundreds of thousands of laws and government regulations that address how we live and conduct our activities. New laws and regulations are being churned out daily.

It takes a delicate balance to maintain our basic freedoms in an environment of increasing government control. Our Sunshine Laws in Ohio – The Public Records Law and The Open Meetings Law – are critical tools in keeping government from overwhelming our freedom. First, they demand that governmental bodies make their decisions in the public. Second, they allow anyone to have access to most governmental records, providing accountability for government actions.

Without these critical protections, we would soon find ourselves limited to voting in meaningless elections, since we would have little information or knowledge of how government is working and spending our taxes. Some public officials, including too many in the lake area, consider some of the Sunshine provisions to be nuisances. Yes, it would be easier to conduct business in private, using e-mail and the emerging video conferencing technology. Yes, it takes time to respond to public record requests and then to answer questions about those records. It's a hassle to have to schedule meetings around posting schedules. It's a waste of time to have to answer questions from uninformed citizens. Yes, government would be a lot more efficient without the Sunshine Laws, particularly for those in charge. We would soon find that "efficient" government is suffocating our freedom.

Each year our Sunshine protections are assaulted in the name of privacy, convenience and security. Each exception to public disclosure brings closer the day we discover that we have lost control of our government.

A recent *Beacon* story on Union Township quoted Trustee President John Slater saying that the recently revised Public Records Act now allows trustees to request the identity of the person requesting public information and the intent of the request. In a very technical sense, Slater is correct, but he left out a very critical part. HB9, which amended The Public Records Act last year, in Sec. 149.43 (B) (5) states (emphasis added), "A public office or person responsible for public records may ask a requestor to make the request in writing, may ask for the requester's identity, and may inquire about the intended use of the information requested, **but may do so only after disclosing to the requester that a written request is not mandatory and that the requester may decline to reveal the requester's identity or the intended use...**" So you DON'T have to make your request in writing, identify yourself or tell why you want the records.

We do suggest you put requests in writing to document when and what you have requested in the event the public office fails to comply with your request. That written record will make it easier if you have to ask a judge to enforce your public record rights.

Public records and open meetings are not just for journalists. These important rights belong to everyone, not just residents or property owners. For example, a Hebron resident can ask for City of Columbus public records. "Use it or lose it" is good advice when it comes to our Sunshine Laws. Take an hour or two some evening to attend a public township trustee, village council or school board meeting. It's important for our elected officials to see citizens at public meetings. Feel free to ask questions – it's your government.

If you've got questions about your government, ask them. Do you want to see the school district budget? It's there for you to review. Wonder how your township trustees or village council is spending money? Ask for an itemized list of their expenditures. Wonder what goes on in zoning commission meetings? Ask for copies of the meeting minutes. Want to see a variance application? It's a public record.

Public records belong to you!

The BUCKEYE LAKE Beacon
SERVING ALL THE COMMUNITIES OF THE BUCKEYE LAKE REGION

Editor/Publisher Charles Prince
 Features Editor Kim Garee
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More Than 14,500 copies distributed in the Buckeye Lake area.

• Free in distribution area •
 Mail \$29/year; Students (Sept.-May) \$22/year
 Snowbirds (Nov.-April) \$15/year

News Deadline-Friday 4:00pm
 P.O. Box 1542 • 4675 Walnut Rd. • Buckeye Lake, OH 43008
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 www.buckeyelakebeacon.com

*Published by Impact Publications
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Writers say ORRD only cares about land, not people

Editor:

Some folks just can't keep their noses out of other people's business. They are trying to run Bob Richardson out of business. He has been there for 20 years and the folks he employs will be out of jobs (plus the township, county and state will be out of monies). He cannot afford to go some place else and start over.

ORRD says they've had enough time – it's time for HydroMaster to go. I wonder how many of them have home businesses? How many of them are going to go buy business property and take their business out of their homes for the greater good of the township? Where's the integrity of ORRD? They don't care about the people, only the land.

They say they support the farmers, but they only support the farmers when the farmers want to keep their land – so they can come out here and trespass on the farmer's land with their ATV's for their

recreation and for their serene views. They don't support them when they want to sell to the highest bidder (as anyone would) knowing that housing development would most likely go in. Yes, they come out here, buy their postage stamp property and then, want to stop urban sprawl. Those are some nice folks for you.

I believe that HydroMaster deserves as much time as they need. It is never easy to come up with hundreds of thousands of dollars for commercial property and/or it's never easy to tell trusted employees that they're out of a job. If they don't like our area, they should move back to where they came from and leave the rest of us alone. What is our country becoming when you can ruin someone's life? Freedom is not free!!

We need to band together and not let a few people tell the rest of us what to do.

Mr. & Mrs. Richard Congrove
Liberty Township

'Computer geek' responds to 'watchdog'

Editor:

Upon reading Ms. Mansfield's "letter", another obvious "inaccuracy" leaps to view.

Councilperson Bobbi Miller's letter stated that the Council had voted "to sign a contract with SWL water." She did not state that a contract had been signed.

Ms. Mansfield also refers to me as the "computer geek" as if that were an insult. To the contrary, I wish to thank her for the compliment! The reason that I have not built a website for the village is that the council has not directed me to do so. We have discussed developing one, but they have not yet made a decision to do one. I'm sure that Ms. Mansfield, with her degree in business and computer programming could easily build and maintain such a site. (Oh wait, that's ME who has that degree! My error.)

I also find it interesting that Ms.

Mansfield refers to Mr. Starr as "Chuck" rather than "Charles" as he signs his letters. Maybe he's a member of HER "good old boys club"?

Ms. Mansfield. If you would come to the meetings, and behave in a courteous and respectful manner instead of the constant under the breath comments and outbursts that have caused you to be cited in the past, you could get your information first hand rather than relying on the old game of "telephone" for your data. Remember how things get changed in the relay of information?

Come to the meetings citizens and get the facts rather than listen to the obviously biased, out of context writings of Ms. Mansfield.

Bill Harper
Reynoldsburg

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