

Register | Login

Greenville Business Magazine | Pee Dee Business Jour

Search

Home People Companies Industries Opinions Resources Directories Events Magazine

Sunshine Week Spotlights Transparency Success Stories

By **Reba Campbell**
March 01, 2014

0 0 0 3

Every March, the newspaper industry recognizes Sunshine Week as a way to bring awareness to the importance of transparency in government operations. This is also a good time for elected officials in our cities and towns to celebrate government openness and to make sure citizens are aware of the diversity of information available about their city's operations.

At first glance, transparency may appear to mean just following the state's Freedom of Information Act or posting a city budget online. In reality, a truly transparent government can do many things to make its decisions and actions more accessible.

"The Internet really makes it easy for any city to post documents for public use that formerly needed to be accessed in person or requested by mail," says Bill Rogers, executive director of the SC Press Association. "That cuts down on many of the requests that reporters used to have to submit using FOIA."

Thanks to the ease of posting information on city websites, most cities can now make available their monthly check registers, annual audits required by state law, and their CAFR or Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports. Even the smallest towns can use the Internet to do this with today's technology.

"Ridgeway's town newsletter, strategic plan, and meeting dates are posted on the town's website which keeps our community in the know," says Mayor Charlene Herring. "We also mail our town newsletter with the water bill each month so all citizens are informed. Also it keeps our government work open and transparent to the community." Herring also holds monthly meetings with the merchants regarding town government to help increase transparency.

In addition to posting routine financial documents so they can be easily accessible to residents, some cities are publishing additional documents written in everyday language to outline budget decisions.

In Camden, for example, the city publishes a "budget in brief" document annually that gives a high level overview of the city's fiscal condition, an overview of the city's strategic plan and an outline of revenue sources.

One of several tools that Cayce uses to communicate budget information to residents is a flyer that the sanitation staff tapes to roll carts. Mayor Elise Parton says the flyers are "efficient and cost effective while empowering our residents to understand how we make the decisions we do."

In the City of Columbia, the city manager publishes a year-end report detailing budget decisions using easy-to-understand visuals that tie spending to specific projects funded.

Cities are also making it easier to use the Freedom of Information Act to request information. In Camden, the city has easy-to-follow guidelines, a fee schedule, and a simple request form online.

"The more detailed information we can get from a requester up front, the easier it is for us to supply the information requested," said Caitlin Corbett, assistant city manager. "This form and guidelines have made FOIA requests much simpler for requesters and the city employees filling the request."

For local governments that don't have the website or staff capacity to post check registers online, the state Comptroller General's Office can help assist without charge.

"We can provide guidance for any municipality wanting to add spending transparency on its own website, or we can make available a separate page on ours for that purpose," said Comptroller General Richard Eckstrom.

Eckstrom notes that his statewide transparency website currently includes 20 cities and towns that post online check registers, including most of the state's largest municipalities. Irmo was the first municipality in South Carolina to provide online check registers through this central transparency website.

Elected officials and staff in the state's cities and towns can take advantage of the Municipal Association of South Carolina's many training programs that put a strong focus on transparency and open government, says Miriam Hair, the Association's executive director.

"We work with the Press Association every year to provide substantial training on FOIA compliance to elected officials and city staff," Hair says. "Our website has many resources available that municipal officials, reporters, and the general public can access regarding the Freedom of Information Act, specifics of running meetings in the most open way possible, records retention, and getting audits done in an accurate and timely manner."

[Submit a comment](#)

Comments (0)	In
View All Editor recommended Reader recommended	

Copyright © 2012 by Integrated Media Publishing

Support: support@columbiabusinessmonthly.com

