

## **Sunshine needed as the pandemic wanes**

Kay Stephens, Altoona Mirror

After months of COVID-19 related restrictions, a sunny day in spring should be viewed as an embraceable reminder of better days ahead.

So with the arrival of Sunshine Week 2021, a national observation in support of open government, we would similarly embrace improved attitudes from all leaders when it comes to keeping their citizens informed.

The necessity of access to public records was very evident on March 9 during a two-hour hearing before the House State Government Committee.

Transparency gurus, local governmental officials and media advocates all spoke of how the laws governing public access to government records became more critical during the pandemic, a year when Pennsylvania residents were subject to more governmental rules than ever.

It was pointed out during the hearing that the state's Disease Prevention and Control Act's confidentiality clause prevents release of broader COVID-19 case data. An amendment to that law, Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association counselor Melissa Melewsky told the lawmakers, could release the data and still protect people's private health information through exemptions in the state's open records law.

Perhaps access to those or to other governmental records could render a better-than-provided explanation behind the sluggish distribution of COVID-19 vaccines throughout our state.

When governments leaders fail to offer adequate answers to questions, alternatives include filing a public records request and attending their public meetings, both hampered by the pandemic.

As COVID-19 cases began to spread in our state last spring, governmental offices closed and gave low priority to addressing public record requests.

Governing bodies, understandably, looked for alternatives to meeting in person and started depending on telephone and computerized video connections. From the beginning and through today, public access to those meetings seems to be an afterthought instead of a priority.

It's not unusual to see a public meeting notice indicate that the public, when accessing a meeting convened by telephone, can only speak during a public comment period. Some of our local governments aren't that restrictive when they meet in person so why shouldn't they take questions from telephone meeting attendees in the dark about the agency's business?

Perhaps an alternative should be an online posting of detailed agendas with all supporting documents, along with all meeting minutes, including draft versions that are regularly approved without changes.

We do recognize that some local school boards opted for video transmissions of their meetings, with extensive time for public comment, for addressing the possible return to in-school learning. That seems to be the best alternative to an in-person meeting, depending on the camera angle and the audio quality.

As we look forward to the end of this pandemic, governmental leaders need to give priority to the public as they consider how to conduct business inside their offices and during their business meetings.

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed many governments into exploring technological options. Some worked OK after users discovered the “unmute” symbol. Others were marred by broken audio connections and squelching noises that should be reserved for Halloween.

In the interest of transparency and open government, we call on all governing leaders to do a better job with improving access to public meetings, to public records and to welcome the public into their offices when it’s deemed safe to do so.

The arrival of spring’s sunshine, after a yearlong pandemic, is a reminder of how much we yearn for open government.

**This editorial was written by Kay Stephens, an Altoona Mirror reporter since 1977, longtime Pennsylvania Women’s Press Association officer and supporter of open government.**