

The rights of free speech and a free press are historically and inextricably intertwined. Today and moving forward, these rights demand protection as much, if not more, than ever.

Pennsylvania celebrates Sunshine Week March 13-19, and there is an excellent reason for choosing this timeframe.

Our fourth president, James Madison, drafted the Bill of Rights in 1791. He believed in freedom of the press, saying “*and the freedom of the press, as one of the great bulwarks of liberty, shall be inviolable.*”

Madison was born March 16. Celebrating Sunshine Week at the time of his birthdate continues to honor the man who had the foresight to protect the press, the watchdog over government.

Those of us in the media rally in support of Sunshine Week as it allows us to remind government officials that they are answerable for their actions. There are few things more important than holding our government accountable. This accountability requires transparency. If left unchecked, inefficient government can rob citizens not only of their hard-earned dollars, but also of their very freedom.

My first job in the newspaper business was as a staff reporter at the Tyrone, Pennsylvania, Daily Herald. On my first day I was sent to cover a regional sewer authority board meeting. Talk about a plum assignment. After spending hours listening to five older men talk about sewage flow rates and sewer backups, I asked myself, “Who really wants to read about sewers?”

As it turned out, every resident of Blair County needed to know what happened at that meeting. Those five men discussed the possible construction of a new sewage treatment plant at a cost of millions of taxpayer dollars. Without newspaper coverage -- without freedom of the press and the Sunshine Act -- tax dollars would have been spent without oversight.

Informing the public, serving as watchdog with the freedom to gather and disseminate information, is the essence of our basic liberties.

Those of us in the media should never take the rights of freedom of speech or freedom of the press for granted. The success of any transparency initiative depends on citizen involvement. We have a government that is of the people, by the people, and for the people. We do not elect dictators in this country; we elect individuals who are expected to represent our interests at all times.

In the past 12 months we have seen thousands of concerned citizens throughout our state attend municipal and school board meetings. This has led to more involvement in local government, which also leads to better-informed citizens and taxpayers. This action by the people is what forces transparency onto government from the bottom up. Positive results come out of government when you have a proactive and informed electorate. The only way to truly have an informed and

proactive electorate is to have a free and open press, a press allowed to do its job unimpeded in order to inform constituents about what elected leaders are doing.

I try to attend local government meetings where I personally have skin in the game. Both as a journalist and as a taxpayer, I want to know how my elected officials are representing me and how they are spending my tax dollars. I also want to know who my elected local representatives are on a personal level.

In the interest of transparency and open government, I call on all elected officials to sincerely pledge to continue improving public access to government meetings and public records. In Pennsylvania, by law, public notices are currently published in the local newspaper of record. There are elected officials at the local and state levels who constantly attempt to change this law. I'll leave it to the reader to question why any elected leader would not want voters to know what is happening in their own communities, or behind the meeting room doors of the state Capitol, the county courthouse or borough hall.

In late January I attended a township supervisor meeting in Cumberland Township, Adams County, where I informed the solicitor that the township had violated the Pennsylvania Sunshine Act by not publicly announcing that the supervisors held several executive sessions since their last public meeting. While I did not believe the township was trying to hide anything from the public, even the smallest violations of the state's Sunshine Act need to be brought out into the light of day.

What can you as citizens do to protect the freedoms of speech and press that you are guaranteed by the Constitution?

You, the readers, are taking step one right now by buying and reading your local newspaper. I will tell you a secret: Yahoo, Facebook, Instagram, even CNN, do not care what is happening in your cities and towns. They will not help you fight city hall or go to bat for you if you feel school taxes are too high. But the reporters at your local newspaper will listen to you and be at the meetings to report on what you say and how your elected officials respond.

You also need to be your own advocate. Attend local borough council and township supervisor meetings. Ask questions about how police resources are being allocated and how your tax dollars are being spent. It is your money; you should want to know how it is being spent.

With the official arrival of spring, we as a state and nation are trying to finally put the pandemic behind us. Sunshine Week is a very appropriate time to look forward to the warmth of times to come in an upbeat and transparent light.

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