

CTG Online News

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The Good News Story of Sunshine Week

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March 13th-19th is Sunshine Week, the seven-day period each spring when Americans are reminded of the value of access to government information. The essence of Sunshine Week is government transparency. It joins journalists, advocacy organizations, all manner of experts, and ordinary people in the belief that public access to government information is a good thing. It embodies both a sense of history and an eye on the future. Traditional values such as an independent press, and legal rights such as freedom of information and open meetings laws, sit beside new approaches like data.gov, mash-ups, and Apps for America.

Most often Sunshine week is noted by front page news stories about freedom of information laws and the conflicts that occur between those who want access to government information and those who hold the keys to access. These struggles highlight and illustrate the essential need for public accountability from both politicians and administrators. But accountability isn't the only theme that should interest us during Sunshine week. We should also acknowledge the vast amounts of useful information that federal, state, and local governments make available every day to anyone without a formal request.

Some examples "crowdsourced" from CTG's staff:

- Do you want to know if your property tax assessment is in line with your neighbors? In many municipalities, citizens no longer have to visit the tax assessor, but can just look up local assessment information online.
- Care about the performance of your local schools? You can find out and compare them to others according to graduation rates, class size, cost per student, math scores, and a host of other measures by looking at the statewide school report cards.
- Worried about health hazards in your environment? Take a look at EPA's Toxics Release Inventory for localized information about the toxic by-products of manufacturing.
- Wonder where the \$700+ billion on federal recovery funds are going? Follow the money on Recovery.gov.
- Concerned about cancer or heart disease or want to know how to manage diabetes or a colicky baby? Check out these and hundreds of other health topics on MedLine Plus at the National Library of Medicine.
- Are you a history buff? Take a look at the digital history collections in public libraries and archives.

This is just a tiny sample of the many information sources provided by government and supported by taxpayers for public use. None of them is perfect, to be sure, but they have undeniable economic, civic, and social value. This is the good news story of Sunshine Week - let's give it its fair share of attention.