

## Southwest

### Arkansas

#### **Baxter Bulletin**

<http://www.baxterbulletin.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060316/NEWS01/603160311/1002>

### **Internet provides easy access to public records**

MAGGIE ROTERMUND  
Bulletin Staff Writer

For many, making a Freedom of Information request can seem like a daunting task. Few realize that much of the information they seek is easily available on the Internet.

Many public entities have Web sites. And these Web sites have information. Contracts, calendars, salaries — much of this can be found without ever leaving the comfort of your personal computer.

*The Baxter Bulletin* recently looked at local public Web sites — what they have and what they don't.

#### **Baxter County**

- **Judge and county government**

Baxter County's Web site, [www.baxtercounty.org](http://www.baxtercounty.org), has good information about the county on its site. Information about burn bans and the county road plan is easily available from its home page.

The site also offers a history of Baxter County, information on elected officials and departments within the county.

- **Sheriff's office**

The Baxter County Sheriff's Office can be reached on the Web at [www.baxtercountysheriff.com](http://www.baxtercountysheriff.com). The site includes information on all sheriff's officers. The site also includes information on the D.A.R.E. program, employment opportunities in the department and registered sex offenders in the county.

The site also includes links to other law enforcement sites.

- **City of Cotter**

Cotter's site, [www.cotterarkansas.com](http://www.cotterarkansas.com), has information on contacting all city officials. The site also connects users to information on schools, special attractions and photos of the city's Big Spring Park and Rainbow Arch bridge.

- **City of Mountain Home**

Mountain Home's Web site has city census information, along with links to each city department, including the street, water and fire departments. The site, [www.cityofmountainhome.com](http://www.cityofmountainhome.com), also has a map and a calendar of upcoming events in and around Mountain Home.

The city police department Web site, [www.mountainhomepolice.com](http://www.mountainhomepolice.com), has information on sex offenders, police programs and how to contact the department.

- **City of Norfolk**

The city of Norfolk's Web site, [www.norfolk.net](http://www.norfolk.net), has basic information on city government, local businesses and area attractions.

#### Marion County

Marion County does not have a Web site. The cities of Yellville and Flippin both have sites. Yellville's site, [www.yellvilleWeb.com](http://www.yellvilleWeb.com), has basic information on city government, local businesses and area attractions.

Flippin's site, [www.flippinWeb.com](http://www.flippinWeb.com), also has basic information on city government, local businesses and area attractions.

#### Schools

School Web sites provide information on calendars, upcoming events, staff and other items of interest. Some school districts, like Flippin, provide links to copies of school personnel contracts. The sites also have information on sporting events.

- Cotter <http://cotter.oursc.k12.ar.us>
- Flippin <http://flippin.ar.schoolWebpages.com>
- Mountain Home <http://bombers.k12.ar.us>
- Norfolk <http://panthers.k12.ar.us>
- Yellville <http://yspanthers.k12.ar.us>

*Editor's note: This is national Sunshine Week, a week dedicated to open government and the public's right to know. The Baxter Bulletin will participate in Sunshine Week by printing stories each day about the Freedom of Information Act, how it has been used and what it means to Twin Lakes Area residents.*

## Arizona

### **The Arizona Republic Phoenix**

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/0312sunshine0312.html>

## **Spotlight on public-records law**

*Know your rights in obtaining information*

**Ginger D. Richardson**  
The Arizona Republic

Ever wonder whether your family doctor has ever been disciplined? Pondered whether your favorite restaurant has a clean health-inspection record?

Been curious about what they're building next door?

A few years ago, finding such information was a time-consuming process. Residents had to trek down to the relevant government office, wait in line, fill out a public-records request and look through volumes of documents.

But these days, a world of information is just a mouse click away, for those who know how to find it.

From neighborhood crime statistics and City Council meeting minutes to elementary school lunch menus and calendars, public agencies have put volumes of documents on the Internet. Nearly every city in the Valley, for example, has its own Web site, and some contain tens of thousands of pages of information.

And many documents that aren't available online can be easily requested by simply sending an e-mail or

filling out an online form.

"The days of having to go down to an office and requesting a shoebox full of documents are over," said Dan Barr, an attorney for the First Amendment Coalition of Arizona.

In fact, online information has become an increasingly valuable tool for everyday people.

Kat Henderson of Tempe said she uses the Tempe Elementary School District's Web site on a daily basis to check the cafeteria offerings. Her son is a vegetarian.

Today marks the start of the second-annual "Sunshine Week: Your Right to Know," a nationwide effort designed to encourage discussion on the importance of open government.

As part of that event, *The Arizona Republic* is taking a look at Arizona's Public Records Law, including how to access information, what's available electronically and what's being withheld.

Arizona's public-records statute was first adopted in 1901, with a single paragraph that stated that all records kept by the government must be open to the public. That crux of that law is still in effect today, and experts say that, for the most part, Arizona's statute is a good one.

"There are quite a number of exemptions, but we aren't that much different than other states, either in the amount of records that you can get or those that you can't," said John Fearing, executive director of the Arizona Newspaper Association.

The current law governs what documents must be released but also makes provisions for those that can be withheld.

Medical records, for example, aren't public, nor are adoption records or court records that contain certain information about juveniles.

The law also states that information must be released in a timely fashion. But as former Mesa teacher Shari-Anne Fischer found out, that doesn't always happen.

Fischer said it took a lot of persistence - and several months of asking - to get the Mesa district to release her personnel files.

"It left a bad taste in my mouth because the teacher is not entitled to a copy of their records," she said. "It took my husband several months of phone calls and showing up in person before they would say, 'yes.' "

Mesa district spokeswoman Kathy Bareiss said the district makes every effort to respond to requests in a timely manner and often provides residents information without making them fill out a form.

"Typically, when people call for information, we make every effort to provide it," she said. "There might be some instances where it might take a little longer."

But although Arizona's statute is clear on the prompt release of public documents, it is decidedly vague when it comes to electronic records.

For example, the law does not require public bodies to put information into a computer database nor to make information available in electronic format. That means that in some municipalities, such as Chandler, a person can get campaign-finance information just by visiting the city's Web site. But in other cities, like Phoenix, a requestor has to go down to the City Clerk's Office and pay a copying fee of 14 cents per page.

The law also includes broad provisions that allow many agencies to withhold certain information that they have deemed "sensitive" or potentially hazardous to public safety.

Such issues have taken on an increasingly high-profile status since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, with debates raging almost daily around the country about what information should or should not be considered private.

In Arizona, agencies have decided that a wide range of information - from security measures at the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station and detailed schematics of water-distribution lines, to communication sites for public safety or aviation equipment and diesel fuel-storage facilities - should not be made available, electronically or in any other format.

"Right after 9/11, the City Manager's Office started looking at what we needed to do to protect certain information," said Rob Sweeney, Phoenix's acting assistant chief information officer. "There is just no business need for some people to see some of this sensitive information, so why provide access to it?"

There are those, however, who are concerned that too much information is now being withheld in the name of national security. Sunshine Week was created, in part, to foster dialogue about that very issue.

"I think there were some things that needed to be taken from public view after September 11," said Andy Alexander, the Washington bureau chief for Cox Newspapers and chairman of the American Society for Newspaper Editors' Freedom of Information Committee. "But we have seen, around the country, a number of cases where information has been taken down in the absence of good public discussion. Those discussions need to take place."

**Republic writers Karina Bland and JJ Hensley contributed to this article.**

<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/0313sunshine-home0313.html>

## **Public records help home buyers, renters choose wisely**

**Cary Aspinwall and Matthew Benson**

The Arizona Republic

Mar. 13, 2006 12:00 AM

In the market for a new home? Thinking about signing a lease in a different part of town?

A little research could keep your new digs from becoming a big headache.

Public records are handy tools for prospective buyers and renters considering taking the leap. The information can keep your happy little home from being marred by airport traffic overhead, a freeway through the front yard or felons for neighbors. In the least, the records let you know before you sign on the dotted line.

Experts such as RL Brown advise that consumers arm themselves with as much information as possible before signing a sales contract or lease.

"There's no such thing as enough due diligence that prospective consumers can do," said Brown, who provides research for developers and large corporations before they buy and build.

Much of the research is made easier by a wealth of information that counties, state agencies and local communities have made available on their Web sites, letting anyone become a neighborhood sleuth.

Re/Max designated broker Shelly Berry also recommended that prospective home buyers obtain a buyer's advisory guide, which includes Web sites and phone numbers to find much of the research.

But, ultimately, it's up to the buyer.

"If you have children, you're thinking about schools. You're thinking about crime," Berry said. "That's probably the most important thing people are looking at."

With the real estate market cooling off, snap decisions are no longer the rule. In most cases, Berry said, buyers should have time to do the research before they make an offer.

## New Mexico

### **Albuquerque Tribune**

[http://www.abqtrib.com/albq/nw\\_national/article/0,2564,ALBQ\\_19860\\_4537814,00.html](http://www.abqtrib.com/albq/nw_national/article/0,2564,ALBQ_19860_4537814,00.html)

### **Poll shows desire for open government**

**By Thomas Hargrove and Guido H. Stempel III**

**Scripps Howard News Service**

**March 13, 2006**

Most Americans say the federal government operates with "too much secrecy" and overwhelmingly say that public access to records is critical to democracy, according to a Scripps Howard News Service poll.

First Amendment advocates hailed the findings of the survey of 1,007 adult residents of the United States conducted at the request of the American Society of Newspaper Editors as part of its observance of National Sunshine Week, which started Sunday.

"People clearly think that their federal government is more secretive than state or local governments. And they are probably right," said Lucy Dalglish, executive director of the Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press in Arlington, Va. "It has become more difficult to get information out of the federal government."

Andy Alexander, chairman of the newspaper editors' Freedom of Information Committee, said the survey confirms that people think their national government is excessively secretive.

"We commissioned the survey so that we could show, scientifically, what we know anecdotally - citizens want the federal government to be more open and transparent," said Alexander, Washington bureau chief for Cox Newspapers.

The survey, conducted by the Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University, found that 59 percent of Americans say the national government has "too much secrecy." Forty-five percent were as critical of the level of secrecy in their state and local governments.

The findings come at a time when news organizations are challenging hundreds of federal secrets, such as the identities of 500 prison detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, or records in the investigation of CIA agent Valerie Plame's leaked identity.

Former Attorney General John Ashcroft set a tone for federal secrecy when, shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, he issued a memo promising to defend federal officials for deciding "to withhold records, in whole or in part" from the public.

"Right now, all of the incentive is for classifying information," said Lee Hamilton, a former member of the 9/11 commission and president of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. "You might say the motto is: 'When in doubt, classify.'"

In the poll, 86 percent said they are "very interested" or "somewhat interested" in the "actions and activities" of state and local government, while 88 percent expressed similar interest in the federal

government. Fifty-two percent said they are "very interested" in federal activities compared with 38 percent expressing the highest level of interest in local and state government.

"Americans are intensely interested in what goes on at all levels of government," Alexander said. "Public officials should take note of that. Citizens want to know more about their government, and they clearly do not want more secrecy."

ASNE is spearheading Sunshine Week, in which news organizations and civic groups seek to raise public awareness of the importance of open government.

The survey asked: "Do you believe that public access to government records is critical to the functioning of good government, or do you believe that it plays only a minor role?" Sixty-two percent said records access is critical, 25 percent said it has a minor role, and 13 percent were undecided or gave other responses.

Respondents were also asked to rate whether various governments are "open and transparent" or "closed and secretive." Only 10 percent said state and local governments tend to be "very secretive" and 30 percent said these governments can be "somewhat secretive."

Overall, 55 percent considered these governments open to public scrutiny.

But the federal government is regarded with greater suspicion. Only 33 percent said Uncle Sam is "very open" or "somewhat open," while 40 percent said it is "somewhat secretive" and 22 percent said it is "very secretive." In both questions, 5 percent were undecided or gave a different response.