

Let the Sun Shine In

Your Right to Know

YOUR government is a business owned by YOU, the citizen and taxpayer. Like every other business, it has records. In fact, the government keeps many records, both about how it does business and about people in your community. Citizens, like you, have the right to see these records to know if your government is doing a good job.

On the federal level, the law guaranteeing these rights is the **Freedom of Information Act**. Each state also has its own law guaranteeing these rights, often called the **Sunshine Law**.

Freedom of Information Act

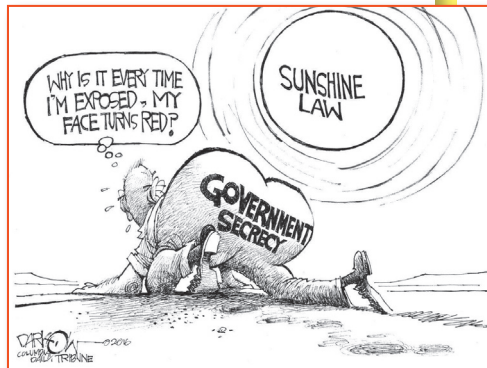
The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was adopted by Congress and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 4, 1966. The law was expanded in 1974 as a result of the Watergate scandal which led to President Richard Nixon's resignation, and it continues to be improved by Congress as years go by.

The Freedom of Information Act says that any person has the right to request access to federal agency records or information. There are several exclusions to the law.

The Freedom of Information Act applies only to federal agencies and does not apply to records held by Congress, the courts, or by state or local government agencies.

You can learn more about the Freedom of Information Act at [FOIA.gov](http://foia.gov).

Court decisions have also modified the law, limiting access. Under the Freedom of Information Act, if the government denies your request for records, you can sometimes appeal, request mediation or file a lawsuit charging that the government is unfairly withholding information.



The Sunshine Law



State Sunshine laws cover state, county and local government records. Sunshine Laws require that government meetings be posted and the meetings must be held at times and places that are convenient and open to you — the public.

Missouri's Sunshine Law was created in 1973, making it one of the early states to pass a law like this. The Sunshine Law helps your local newspaper keep track of what is happening in your local

government and school district.

Sunshine Week is held each year in March to remind us that the right to know about local government is important to us. These laws help you, as a local citizen, understand what is happening in your communities and how the government's actions affect your life. You can learn more about Sunshine Week at sunshineweek.org.

Using these laws to ask for information can make you a better voter and allow you to contribute to making your town a better place to live.

What Is Excluded From These Laws?

Sunshine Laws and the Freedom of Information Act all have exceptions to what must be shared with the public.

For example:

- The federal government can keep secret the information it has on an individual's personal affairs or national security information.
- State governments can keep secret private information about employees.

Learn More

- You can learn how to file a Freedom Of Information Act request by visiting <http://www.foia.gov/how-to.html>.
- You can learn how to file a Missouri Sunshine Law request by visiting <http://tinyurl.com/pbba4zq>.

Some Ways These Laws Help YOU

- Review city council agendas and meeting minutes to help you know what your local government is doing. These will help you learn about important policy decisions being made where you live.
- Learn more about your local schools by reviewing their meeting minutes at the district offices and attending the meetings which are posted at the district offices.
- If a piece of property next to your house is being re-zoned, the zoning board must hold a public meeting under the Sunshine Law.
- Access county assessment and property tax records to see if your real estate taxes are comparable to others living nearby in similarly-sized houses.
- Law enforcement records can help you determine how often crime happens in your neighborhood.
- A request to the Federal Bureau of Investigation or Department of Justice can reveal what information the government is keeping on record about you, the requester.
- State economic development records will tell you where state grants have been given to projects in your town.
- The local water department can give you information on water quality in your community.
- State campaign finance records will show how much money is spent by lobbyists in your state government and how much is spent by candidates in your local and statewide elections.
- Review complaints filed in the state consumer protection division, often part of the state attorney general's office, which identify the names of companies that have complaints filed against them.
- Local police department records show the number of complaints filed against your local law enforcement officers.
- A request to any federal agency can identify local projects that have received federal environmental funds.



Brought to you by the Missouri Sunshine Coalition (missourisunshine.org), Missouri Press Association and your newspaper.