

Locals keep it transparent during pandemic

This is Sunshine Week 2021.

Coincidentally, it arrives the week we adjust to daylight saving time, but Sunshine Week is dedicated to preserving a different sort of illumination — shedding light on government.

Launched in 2005 by the American Society of News Editors — now called the News Leaders Association — the week has grown into a full-scale initiative to promote open government.

One of the biggest challenges that local school boards, councils, county commissioners and more have faced since Sunshine Week 2020 has been ensuring that they abide by the state Open Meeting Law. Online meetings became the norm and, we suspect, for several elected bodies will remain an integral part of their operation even once in-person meetings are allowed.

There have been few, if any, abuses of this option locally. Elected officials openly and confidently discussed ways to ensure access during the pandemic and did a fine job alerting citizens on how to participate.

In fact, you can argue that thanks to Zoom, Google Meets and YouTube access, today more residents are “attending” meetings than ever before. Skeptical? Look at the number of viewers online during any meeting — many more than you’d typically find in person before the pandemic — and visit local governments’ video channels where you’ll find many “views” including dozens of people watching as the meetings unfold. Online meetings have proven convenient for citizens.

Of course, online meetings offer potential for violations and lackadaisical compliance. Not all elected officials use a camera, so it’s hard to tell who is present and sometimes who is speaking. The International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors have reported lack of roll call votes elsewhere, so citizens sometimes have no idea who actually supported or prevented some action.

You can help to carry the torch for open government this week and into the future.

If you are part of a civic group, organize a local forum, and sponsor a student essay contest and stress to elected officials the importance of open access to meetings and records.

If you are an educator, talk with students about how government transparency improves our lives and makes our communities stronger.

If you are an elected official, always err on the side of openness. Introduce ordinances, resolutions and law to improve public access and insist that staff receive training on how to comply with existing laws mandating open records and meetings.

If you are a private citizen, write a letter to the editor and spread the word to friends.

Each of us has a civic responsibility in this democratic republic. Together we can ensure that our governments remain transparent and truly of, by and for the people.