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Opinion: Let the Sun Shine In!

By Vermont Secretary of State Jim Condos

An open government makes for a better government.

This is sunshine week and it is being celebrated all across the nation. In reality, it should be celebrated every week – not just this week – in Vermont and every other state.

Here at the Secretary of State's Office, our operations assume 625,000 Vermonters are looking over our shoulders as we go about our daily work – keeping us motivated and accountable.

In fact, this attitude comes straight from the Vermont Constitution:

That all power being originally inherent in and consequently derived from the people, therefore, all officers of government, whether legislative or executive, are their trustees and servants; and at all times, in a legal way, accountable to them. (Chapter 1, Article 6)

Vermont further elaborates in statute on this pillar of constitutional accountability:

It is the policy of this subchapter to provide for free and open examination of records...Officers of government are trustees and servants of the people and it is in the public interest to enable any person to review and criticize their decisions even though such examination may cause inconvenience or embarrassment. (1 V.S.A. § 315)

Sure, there are times when we're embarrassed by our mistakes (yes, we've made a few), but public scrutiny comes with being a public servant. Transparency ensures that when we do make a mistake we immediately own the problem, fix the problem, and move on.

By being an open book, Vermont and local/state officials learn a lesson along the way and work harder to avoid future embarrassment, improving upon how we serve Vermonters.

I have learned many lessons about Open Government from my time with the: South Burlington City Council (18 years), Vermont League of Cities and Towns' Board (6 years), Vermont Senate (8 years), and now 6+ years as Vermont's Secretary of State.

Far too often, government's first reaction is to avoid disclosure, go on the defensive and try to cover up mistakes. That is just the opposite of accountability and does not contribute to public trust. This natural tendency to resist public inquiry and criticism creates an adverse reaction: oppose and don't disclose!

If we are ever to overcome this faulty closed-door culture and rebuild trust in government, we must start with the presumption that everything is public and belongs to the people, with narrow exceptions for good reasons.

As trustees and servants of the people, it's our job as officers of the government to let the sun shine in – to let the people see what we are doing on their behalf.

Yes, it can be inconvenient to have public meetings, or to provide copies of records, but it is a necessary and integral part of the job that we all signed up for and pledged to do when we took our oath of office.

This openness includes the press - and the press is the public!

We must treat them as representatives of the people and not as an enemies of the state. The press plays an important part in promoting effective government (often by exposing ineffective government) and creating a culture of accountability.

In my time as Secretary of State, I have made every effort to be open and available to the Fourth Estate, no matter the inconvenience, embarrassment, or concern about reproach.

Without the press, the public would be left on its own to investigate facts and discern the truth. That is no easy task, especially in today's world.

The vast majority of journalists I have encountered over the years are hard-working people with high ethical standards. I don't always agree with what they write, but I respect a free press, appreciate the service they provide, and understand the job they do.

If this makes anyone in government nervous, perhaps they're in the wrong line of work.

You have a right to know! Demand accountability and results from your government.

Sunshine Week is a national celebration of access to public information and what it means for you and your community.

As Vermont's Secretary of State, Jim Condos has always advocated for government accountability through greater transparency. Secretary Condos will be conducting his fourth Transparency Tour this fall, with stops all across Vermont.

The Secretary of State's office has created guides to help citizens and public servants navigate the Open Meeting Law and Public Records Act. They can be found on our website as www.sec.state.vt.us under the "Municipal" tab.

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