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EDITORIAL: Maintain focus on Sunshine

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During Sunshine Week 2010, Rutherford County residents should put new emphasis on withstanding efforts to chip away at Tennessee's Open Records and Open Meetings laws.

The city of Murfreesboro alone has lobbied for two pieces of legislation this year that could have an impact on the people's right to know.

Murfreesboro wants to shield police records pertaining to an open criminal investigation or prosecution file until the case is closed. The effort stems from a civil case the city faced from an attorney defending a non-resident in a criminal case and involved records related to a K-9 police dog.

The Tennessee Coalition for Open Government opposed the measure when it was raised this year, contending the city's request involving pending criminal investigations could lead to police efforts to try to block access to other reports about crimes, including burglaries.

State law already protects police records pertaining to investigations, but basic facts about where and when the crime occurred should not be shielded, the coalition argued. We agree.

Murfreesboro also wants the Legislature to pass a bill allowing municipalities to post public notices on government Web sites instead of having them published in local newspapers. It also wants to redact from public view certain information provided by job seekers, utility customers and camp-goers in city applications.

City officials contend it is too expensive to place public notices in newspapers of general circulation and that the city could more easily put the information on its Web site.

That flies in the face of Tennessee's Sunshine Law by allowing the city government to control the flow of information, instead of placing it in the hands of an independent, verifiable and dependable medium. The city no longer has its notices published in The DNJ.

Placing public notices only on a government Web site could hamper the ability of people who don't have access to the Internet to find out what's going on with city government. Many elderly people, for instance, don't have access to computers and stay informed about government meetings by reading newspapers.

Furthermore, many cities across Tennessee with ill-kept Web sites could use such a state law to circumvent people from seeing important public notices. City leaders here should use the Web site to complement the continued publication of notices in accordance with the Sunshine Law.

We encourage Murfreesboro officials to continue looking for ways to cut expenses, but no price can be placed on the importance of a well-informed public.

Sunshine Week is a national initiative to engage people in dialogue about their right to know what's going on in government.

Based on legislation being pushed by the city of Murfreesboro and efforts by elected leaders across Tennessee to keep public documents hidden from view, we need Sunshine Week to run all year long,

lest our governments forget they were set up to serve the people, not themselves.

Opinions in this space reflect a consensus of the discussion by The Daily News Journal Editorial Board. The Board includes Andrew Oppmann, president and publisher; Jimmy Hart, executive editor; Sam Stockard, opinion editor; Taylor Loyal, Smyrna AM editor; and David Colin, community member.
