

\*embargoed for use until Sunday, March 12\*

## **Sunshine Week**

By Dirk Milliman

Our Nation's 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Sunshine Week kicks off Sunday, March 12 with a gala event at the Department of Commerce Research Library in Washington, DC.

But most of us won't be attending. In fact, most of us don't have a clue what Sunshine Week is or what it is all about. So here's the background.



Started in 2005, Sunshine Week encourages openness in government. All government. At the national level, in your state government, and all the way down to your county board, your city council, your township trustees.

Sunshine Week was started by press-types. Reporter's organizations, including the Society of Professional Journalists and the American Society of Newspaper Editors were among the founding forces. But Sunshine Week is really about you. YOUR access to government meetings. YOUR access to government information.

Elected or appointed, government is, after all, about you. You are "We the People". Government doesn't spend any of its own money. It spends your money. Government works for you at all levels.

The same is true of government information. In most cases, that information belongs to you, the taxpayer.

And that is what Sunshine Week is all about. Open government.

Citizens are encouraged to recognize units of government or government officials that practice open government. And citizens are also asked to encourage those in office to be even more open with public records, which, after all, belong to the public.

In Lansing, legislation has again been introduced that would open government information and records at the state level by subjecting the Office of the Governor and all elected State Senators and Representatives to the public. The Legislative Open Records Act (LORA) and changes to the Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) laws were introduced in the House late last year. These changes moved through the House with nearly unanimous support only to die in the Senate in the lame duck session.

Early this year, a similar package of bills which included LORA and FOIA changes was introduced in the House with bi-partisan support. A press conference at the introduction featured more than 100 Representatives who support the changes. This marks a great change for openness in Michigan. We are one of only two states that exempt the Governor's office and the State Legislature from FOIA. This legislative class seems to "get it" – that being able to hide the public's information is wrong.

There are still exemptions to complete transparency in the new LORA and FOIA legislation. Communications between you and your representatives are still considered confidential, as are several categories of work product and deliberative information.

But in all, these steps are being taken in the proper direction. Citizens are soon to be that much closer to full and complete access to all the workings of their government.

So, how best to celebrate Sunshine Week, you ask? Sunshine Week is best observed when local citizens share their concerns and kudos with elected members of their governments – at all levels of government. Thank them for their openness. Encourage them to be even more open. Praise them for their hard and thankless work.

And let them know you are watching. During Sunshine Week.

And every week.