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## **Our View: Meekhof Needs to Allow FOIA Expansion**

by Sarah Leach

"You guys are the only people who care about this."

Those were the unapologetic words of Republican state Sen. Arlan Meekhof to a roomful of journalists last month during the Michigan Press Association's annual meeting in Grand Rapids.

He was addressing inquiries as to why he is opposed to legislation that would subject the state Legislature and governor's office to the [Freedom of Information Act](#) — making the official e-mail correspondence of most of Michigan's elected officials available to the public — from moving through the Senate.



It matters what Meekhof says on the issue because, as Senate majority leader, he controls what bills the chamber can vote on. He also just so happens to represent us — the 30th state Senate district matches the borders of Ottawa County.

Every year, journalism groups and other public watchdogs celebrate Sunshine Week (March 12-18 this year), because every once in a while we all need a reminder of whose government it really is.

Government doesn't belong to the politicians who prefer making agreements outside the public eye and would rather not have to deal with the hassle of those pesky citizens looking over their shoulders. Neither does it belong to the bureaucrats who have worked in their jobs so long that they forget where their budgets come from. It is, of course, our government and our tax money, and hence everything government agencies do — whether it's a state department, a city, a township, a school district or special authority — is our business.

That should be obvious, but there are many people working in government, like Meekhof, who are uncomfortable with the idea of public scrutiny. That's why Michigan has FOIA and the Open Meetings Act — two powerful tools that open up government records to journalists, watchdog groups and everyday citizens and ensure that the public's business is conducted in public.

Last year, a 10-bill package passed the House overwhelmingly, but was stopped in the Senate, where Meekhof never took them up in the Senate Government Operations Committee, which Meekhof chairs.

At the time, he pointed to privacy issues for constituents, even though the bills clearly would have exempted lawmakers from having to disclose communications with constituents, other

than lobbyists. If it's party secrets the speaker wanted to protect, the bills would have exempted records held exclusively by the Republican and Democratic legislative caucuses. If it's past indiscretions that were the sticky wicket for him or his colleagues, the new laws would have applied only to records created or possessed the Jan. 1 after the measures were enacted.

Now his defense is citizen apathy.

Then how does he explain the fact that more than half of the 110 members of the Michigan House of Representatives publicly voiced their support of FOIA expansion — including our local Reps. Mary Whiteford, R-Casco Township, and Jim Lilly, R-Park Township — when the legislation was reintroduced as an 11-bill package in early February? (For her part, Rep. Daniella Garcia, R-Holland, said she supports FOIA expansion, but was non-committal to The Sentinel when asked if she would support the reintroduced bills).

The excuses to not move this through are wearing a bit thin, Sen. Meekhof.

The Freedom of Information Act has been under attack in Michigan almost from the moment it was adopted 40 years ago. Amendments over the years have chipped away at its scope, and a 2015 national study by the Center for Public Integrity and Global Integrity [ranked Michigan last among the 50 states](#) for its transparency and ethics laws, partly as a result of the significant FOIA exemptions. We're one of only two states that exempt the governor's and legislative offices (Massachusetts being the other).

And we only have to look at the disastrous Flint water crisis to understand how critical transparency can be: Michigan's exemption allowed the Snyder administration to conceal e-mail correspondence [whose timely disclosure might have](#) cut short one of the worst man-made catastrophes in the state's history.

These aren't special interest bills for the news media. The Freedom of Information Act and Open Meetings Act apply to all citizens, and the bills have support from activist groups at both ends of the political spectrum. In an era of smaller news reporting staffs, empowering citizens as government watchdogs is more important than ever.

"My fellow representatives and I have been entrusted with a great responsibility and I think this shows we have been listening to what our constituents want," Lilly said last month.

Sounds like more of us care than you realize, Sen. Meekhof.