

Wausau Pilot & Review

MORE NEWS. LESS FLUFF. ALL LOCAL.

Guest Column: It's your right. It's your business.

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Every action of government is your business.

Every document held in government halls is your piece of paper.

Every penny spent by government is your money.

From the courthouse to the statehouse to the White House, government belongs to the governed and not the governing.

You have the right to know what the governing are up to, always.

We are self-governed.

The only way the public, and the press, can hold government accountable is by having unfettered access to its deliberations and the documents it holds.

Transparency is not liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat.

The media champions open government in its traditional role as the Fourth Estate, knowing that independent checks and balances are critical to our liberty.

When city council, county commission or the board of education brokers a deal behind closed doors and conceals documents containing important information the public wants and needs to know our freedoms are compromised.

Local government has the biggest impact in our lives on a day-to-day basis.

Whether it is in the form of property taxes, sales taxes, business taxes, state-shared dollars or federal grants, loans and funding, local government is 100 percent taxpayer funded. The decisions being made, the monies being spent and the records being kept by city hall, the county commission, the board of education or the hospital authority affect us all, and when government is allowed to operate behind closed doors, it grows out of control, is not responsive to the public and subject to corruption.

Elected officials — from the school board member to the President of the United States, must remember they answer to the people, not to professional government bureaucrats, not to government lawyers and not to their elevated campaign advisers

It may be true the public has lost a lot of confidence in the national media, but imagine a government run amuck without media watchdogs holding it in check.

Even Thomas Jefferson, who battled with the press, at times excoriating newspapers in his letters, understood that a free press with unfettered access was essential to the health of democracy.

Jefferson would grow irritated with newspapers, even writing, “Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper,” but he is also the man who famously wrote in a letter to Edward Carrington in 1787, “And were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”

When you ask to see the county’s operating budget or challenge whether city council has the right to go into a closed session, remember it’s your right. It’s your business.

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