

3/23/10

Kudos to
our webmaster
& support team,
Debbie Kratzer,
Richard Dodds,
& all of our
employees for
sending items to
be posted in a
timely manner!

Elaine

Put information online

To the Editor:

Let's say you cared about recycling and wanted to find out what your state legislators were doing to improve recycling rates.

Let's say you knew a bill had been proposed that would help, and you wanted to find out who had signed on or what the status was.

Since this issue and legislation is in the state legislature, you're in luck. Fortunately, our state and federal legislators have harnessed the technology of the information age to embrace the Jeffersonian ideal that "an informed citizenry is the bulwark of a democracy."

Whether or not Jefferson ever really uttered those words, the statement does capture one of his important ideas about democracy, that a participatory democracy functions best when its citizens know and understand the issues that their elected officials are dealing with, and, more importantly, how they are dealing with them.

Anyone can follow what their state and federal elected officials are up to with a few mouse clicks. Bills and their progress are posted online. You can even get on a list to be notified by e-mail or instant message on your cell phone. Committee meetings can be viewed or listened to live over the internet or C-Span. Committee votes are posted in real time.

Sadly, most local governments in our county have done a poor job putting information age tools to work to communicate with their citizenry; some municipalities doing an inexcusably dismal job.

While reflecting on how poorly my local government, Milford, communicates, I looked on the internet to see how we compare with surrounding municipalities.

In an arbitrary survey, Kingwood gets first prize. Their Township Committee posts its agenda and minutes of its meetings online once they've been approved. They also post agendas and minutes from the meetings of most boards and commissions.

Alexandria's web site features an up-to-date agenda, but minutes were behind by three months. Some board and commission agendas are posted, but no minutes. Holland posts agendas for the Township Committee, but no minutes and only the Planning Board posts its

agenda, but no minutes. Milford posts both its Council's agenda and minutes, but both are hopelessly out of date, nearly one year old.

The hall-of-shame prize goes to Frenchtown, which has no official town web site, so no agendas or minutes are available.

Hunterdon County government is mediocre at best, with agendas posted in a timely manner, but no posting of minutes during the current calendar year.

If our governor is true to his campaign promises, this may soon change. In his "88 ways I will fix New Jersey," candidate Christie said, "I will increase honesty and openness in government by requiring fully searchable and transparent web sites for all state and local governments and school districts, providing links to property records and taxes, government payrolls, expenditures, school performance report cards, and other information. All information would be accessible to the public no later than 45 days following the close of each fiscal year."

We shouldn't have to wait for the governor or legislature to act!

Look at your town's web site. Do they have one? Do they post agendas and minutes for the governing body, boards and commissions? Do they provide e-mail addresses for elected officials?

We need to hold our elected officials' collective feet to the fire. In this information age where most middle-schoolers can create a web site, there is no excuse for local governments not to post agendas, ordinances, budgets, etc. The cost is minimal, the effort is nominal. An effective communication program should not be considered an optional luxury.

The only reason I can think of for officials to shun this duty is that they really don't want us to know what they are up to and they don't want our participation. If so, shame on them!

And what about you, Democrat? Since you rarely report what local governing bodies are up to, unless you consider it newsworthy (i.e., controversial), why not at least investigate how well municipalities keep their citizens informed and report that?

DAVE JENKINS

Milford