

Pinellas County kept public meeting agendas hidden on county website

They were inaccessible for eight years on the website - another public records flub.
By David DeCamp, St. Petersburg Times, 9/11

Governments publish agendas so people can track what will be discussed at any given meeting, and

show up if they want to voice an opinion.

It's a staple of open government - and a tenet ignored by the agency that oversees Pinellas County's

multimillion-dollar computer networks and digital records.

For at least eight years, the Business Technology Services Board has kept meeting materials private

on a county website, accessible only with a password given to government workers.

The county called the recently revealed restriction an oversight. But it's one of several recent

episodes where the county has skirted the state's laws on open government and public records.

Public records on redistricting, emergency medical services and housing programs have been held

back.

The technology board attracts little attention, but is composed of two county commissioners, County

Administrator Bob LaSala and eight countywide office holders, such as the Clerk of Courts Ken Burke

and State Attorney Bernie McCabe.

Commissioner Ken Welch, who sits on the technology board, stumbled onto the problem this year

and complained. The board agreed recently to make agendas publicly accessible starting with its Oct.

27 meeting. The agendas will be online like other meeting documents on the county's website, which

last year won an award for transparency.

County officials professed ignorance of the hidden agendas until this summer.

"I honestly could not get anyone in the county to explain why they did it," said director Paul

Alexander, who said the agenda had been password-protected for at least the eight years he has run

the agency.

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Others chalked up the restricted access to inadvertent glitches.

"I can tell you the BTS issue was simply an oversight," Welch said. "Transparency is our policy, and we should be making records available."

Yet at times top county officials are less than transparent.

LaSala has refused to release records showing how a proposed redistricting plan was developed, for

example. The proposal, which is due for its only public hearing and final vote Sept. 27, was drawn up

behind closed doors based on 2010 census numbers.

Despite the fact that public records law makes past drafts and communications public, LaSala said he

would not release records that were "inaccurate." He didn't cite an exemption in state law that would

allow him to keep them secret.

Then on Tuesday, LaSala surprised even commissioners by bringing up a substantial report on

emergency medical services without adding it to the agenda. Anyone reading the online or printed

listing would be unaware of the discussion. He talked about it during a vaguely worded agenda item

called "initiatives and projects." Then he called on top staffers to address a closely watched proposal

for firefighters to transport sick people to hospitals instead of private ambulances - a proposal he

opposes.

The staff report criticized the firefighters' plan as too expensive during the hour of discussion that

followed.

Commissioners Nancy Bostock, Neil Brickfield and Norm Roche said they were dismayed that such a

controversial topic wasn't specifically listed by name in the agenda. "At the very least, if the county

administrator and staff is going to address the proposal, we owe the authors and participants at least

the courtesy of letting them know we intend to discuss it," Brickfield said.

The agenda is released at least five days before a public meeting. Sometimes it is updated or

includes a notation that documents will be distributed later. LaSala said he didn't add anything about

the review to the agenda because the final report wasn't distributed until after the meeting started.

Roche said LaSala's handling of an internal audit of the Community Development Department and

the Housing Finance Authority also bothers him.

Last year, internal auditors filleted the county for having contractors pay for a party and gifts, potential

favoritism in loans and poor bookkeeping in the two agencies. LaSala hired a private consultant to do a review.

Roche, a critic of affordable housing programs, has asked repeatedly for the report, which cost \$77,500. At an Aug. 11 meeting, Roche asked again, noting the severity of internal auditors' findings and a March housing presentation by the Community Development Department that was riddled with errors.

"Just so it's perfectly clear, I don't have the report yet," LaSala told the commission.

"Once I do get a presentation from the consultant, I will share it with a number of parties in addition to the board.

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In fact, the report, which the consultant described as final, had arrived the day before in an e-mail to

Assistant County Administrator Carl Harness, according to documents obtained under the public

records law. The county had started receiving drafts a month earlier, on July 8.

When told of the dates of the reports, Roche was surprised, adding that he was

"definitely going to take it up with Bob."

"There's some answers I want, that's for sure," Roche said.

LaSala, whose office is close to Harness', said he first received the report on Aug. 19 when Harness

provided an out-of-date draft to the St. Petersburg Times and commissioners as part of the

newspaper's records request.

"I don't know that we're selectively providing any records. I haven't managed that project," LaSala

said. "And I think you need to talk to Carl about the records."

Harness said the county administrator probably hadn't read the report yet so he wasn't aware of its

status. Harness said he attempted to comply with the Times record request, but initially didn't turn

over some records because he hadn't met yet with the consultant and "some more tweaks were going

on."

But Roche said he wanted the report - ultimately a positive review of the county - to make informed

decisions about spending on affordable housing. Roche ultimately was part of a 4-3 decision on Aug.

23 against spending money sooner for affordable housing. "Frankly from my position, I have zero

tolerance for anyone putting roadblocks to how public records are presented," Roche said. "Our citizens are the ones paying that bill, and they need to be fully informed."