

Take public notices away from newspapers and accountability goes out the window. The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors is a case in point.

In 2008 the Arizona State Legislature allowed counties a free pass on publishing their meeting minutes and warrants. The argument by the Arizona Association of Counties (AACo) and others was that counties would save a few dollars because they would not have to pay newspapers to do it for them. Instead, they were given the option of posting audio or written minutes of the meetings on their websites to which the public would have easy access.

Theoretically, it sounded peachy.

But they did not count on Santa Cruz County, which was already about 18 months behind on publishing its minutes and warrants back when it was still required. Board Clerk Melinda Meek, who is also the county's elections director, very frankly said at the time that publishing these were not her priority in the grand scheme of things. She would get around to it as time and budget permitted. In an email last week, the tune remains the same. (See story on Page 2)

The last time Meek posted minutes to the county website was Feb. 19. 2009.

County management, which backed the AACo's lobbying efforts to nix publishing of public notices, was and continues to be aware of the lag, but obviously does not see it as a priority either.

With no board or legislative pressure to post or upload the minutes, the task continues to fall by the wayside. In fact, the board became so lax it stopped doing three years ago what most boards do as a matter of course - approve the minutes of previous meetings.

Minutes are an official copy of what was voted on during a meeting and state law requires counties and towns to accurately maintain them. Cities and towns, by law, must provide a written version of the minutes within three days or post a recording of the minutes on their web site in the same time limit. Curiously, counties don't have that requirement.

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The SCC board meets almost weekly, yet in 2009, Meek posted on the website just six meetings that were held in January and February. Don't even try to find warrants in case you're wondering how taxpayers' money was spent. They simply aren't there.

Every other Arizona county has been faced with the same financial difficulties and budget cuts, but somehow have managed to keep their minutes relatively current.

When compared to other counties' websites, at best Santa Cruz County is sloppy and negligent. But taken to an extreme, tyrannical governments start out with a simple foothold that allows them to keep their activities non-transparent.

The founding fathers did all they could to fox-proof the chicken coop with checks and balances. In 2008, the Arizona Legislature threw open the door to the county coop.

Santa Cruz County now serves as the poster child for Arizona newspapers fighting to get the legislature to understand the important role of the fourth estate in preserving and publishing public records. How flattering is that?

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