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RITZVILLE ADAMS COUNTY JOURNAL
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Free Press Publishing
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Nov. 5, 2025

Christina Beusch
Rulemaking Coordinator
Attorney General's Office
1125 Washington St. SE
Olympia, Wash. 98504
Sent via email to agorulemaking@atg.wa.gov

Re: Proposed Revisions to Public Records Act Model Rules

Dear Ms. Beusch,

Roger Harnack here, owner of Free Press Publishing Inc., one of the largest community newspaper companies in Eastern Washington. I am writing you today in regard to the 2024 media petition to improve the model rules for the Public Records Act.

That petition described a “crisis” in access to public records. I have to agree. With newspapers and news websites in Spokane, Lincoln, Franklin, Adams and Whitman Counties, our reporters have struggled with gaining access to records that should be readily available, not just to the media, but the general public.

The petition mentioned “outrageously long time estimates for satisfying simple records requests” and “extreme backlogs” that interfered with the public’s right to learn about pressing concerns. I can personally attest on delays in accessing traffic and coroner records, arrest and jail records, routine city records and more.

Some examples:

- Law enforcement and coroners have 48 hours to notify next of kin before release of an identity when a fatality is recorded. Spokane County law enforcement agencies usually refuse to provide identifying information, instead they refer requests to the Medical Examiner’s Office. And when our reporters request the information from the medical examiner, they are told we have to wait for autopsy results. We didn’t ask for autopsy results, we asked for the information/records related to identifying the decedent.
- The Washington State Patrol this year has become more challenging when it comes to accessing what used to be routine documentation. Case-in-point, on Feb. 9, 2025, a couple died in a murder-suicide pact in East Wenatchee, when the driver crashed her car into a tour bus, killing the couple, two others on the bus and injuring 18 others. Rather than provide details in the routine incident report, the patrol contacted the family, Douglas County coroner and others to inform them of media interest. The patrol hid the fact it was a murder-suicide until July. And Douglas County is still refusing to release the names, ages, and manner and cause of death, usually contained in a routine document. In this case, it’s been 9 months, and many of the records are still delayed. Furthermore, the coroner in Douglas County claims he has “discretion” in the release of standard reporting records.
- In Spokane County, the Sheriff’s Office routinely writes press releases on incidents and intentionally leaves out details that are clearly public record. When we ask for clarifications, our reporters get told they shouldn’t print the information — essentially, the information officer has anointed himself as the editor. And when we file public records requests, the agency delays release, often claiming an “investigatory” exemption, even long after a case has been closed.
- In Pullman, the city has lost its police chief, fire chief, a city manager and an interim city manager. In one instance, the communications officer said the city manager resigned, but then she said a written record did not exist. The city manager’s departure led to threats of lawsuits and ultimately cost tax dollars
- Occasionally, we do our own “public records” audits to see which government agencies follow the law. Quite often,



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requests to review a copy of a city manager contract, school district superintendent contract and other documents that should be readily available are met with answers like we'll let you know in five (5) days if and when we can provide it. Again, these are documents that should be readily available.

- In the town of Lind, the mayor and town clerk have told our reporters that copies of ordinances establishing water and utility rates do not exist.
- In Medical Lake and Cheney, the municipal governments have installed license plate-reading cameras at the entrances of roads into the communities. But when we've asked about access to the videos that are being made, we're told the agency doesn't have the video made on behalf of the public. To make matters worse, if we wait too long, we're told the videos are periodically deleted by the company leasing the cameras. In the meantime, cameras continue to track every vehicle that enters/leaves the cities with little access to the public record.
- In some counties, we've encountered difficulty accessing public dispatch logs that have traditionally been provided to the media daily. And when we assert they are public records, the counties delay release, and often redact information that is public under state law.
- Not all jails are providing jail logs with names, ages, charges, booking and release dates. As you know, those items are required to be readily available.
- In Tekoa, City Council members have called meetings without the mayor, met privately in homes and failed to document what occurred. We have a pending request seeking phone, text, email and other records relating to these meetings. At least two city council members have yet to turn over records to the city clerk, so the clerk has been unable to fulfill the request, so far.

These are just a few of the issues we've run into in recent months; reforms are long overdue.

Although the model rule changes proposed by your office don't go far enough to ensure transparency. They are a step in the right direction and should be approved as soon as possible.

Although they are not exactly what the media proposed and do not solve every concern (for example, they would not require agencies to accept fee payments online), they are a much-needed positive step towards fulfilling the promises of the Public Records Act. For more detail on why the changes are needed, please see the "explanation" after each of the media's rule proposals and the media's letter responding to informal comments on the petition.

Thank you for considering this comment in favor of the proposed rules.

Best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'RH', is written over a blue circular stamp or seal.

Roger Harnack
Owner/President
Free Press Publishing, Inc.