



OpEd: Let the Sun Shine In
March 2023

March includes Sunshine Week, an initiative of the News Leaders Association to educate the public about the importance of open government and the need to reduce unnecessary secrecy. This initiative fits well with the mission of the League of Women Voters to promote informed participation by citizens in their government.

The experience of the pandemic has encouraged many government entities to provide information in new ways, some of which were initiated before the pandemic discouraged in-person meetings. In southern New Mexico, for example, we have the opportunity to view online meetings of the Las Cruces City Council, the Doña Ana County Board of Commissioners, and the Las Cruces School Board.

Despite the advantages that technology offers, there is room for improvement. Our local city council provides a much better viewing and listening experience than does the legislature. Speakers at the city council are encouraged regularly to speak into the microphone and the viewer can generally see who is speaking. The materials are shared on a screen. At the legislature, by contrast, the viewer finds a more hit-and-miss experience. Even regular viewers may find it difficult to identify who is speaking and it may be difficult to hear even the committee chair. The legislative committees, on the other hand, provide opportunities to submit comments in-person, as well as in written form, as the meetings are occurring. Challenges are that the meeting may not occur at the appointed time and the agenda may be rearranged in unanticipated ways. People who have taken time to attend meetings in person or who have sat in front of a computer for hours, waiting to speak, may be disappointed when they are not able to do so. A further barrier to participation is the fact that different committees have different sets of rules and sometimes there seem to be conflicting rules. Having a common set of rules for details on submitting comments would be helpful.

In addition to improving the process, sharing data is also important. A case in point is the discussion locally and throughout New Mexico about crime and police procedures. One of the state bills that the League has been following, SB 252 Law Enforcement Procedures Act, includes provisions relating to the creation of a database relating to officer-involved injuries and deaths. The data would be aggregated at regular intervals and shared with the public on one-or-more websites. This type of information may provide an important supplement to anecdotes about occurrences in the community. The data may still be interpreted in different ways, but it would be easier to identify the sources of conflict.

Other steps in the direction of greater transparency include New Mexico's SB 153, which would require the Legislature to publish on its website a searchable list of appropriation allocations contained in a supplemental general appropriation. Voters would know more about how their representatives are spending state money.

Communicate with your representatives about your desire to be better informed and how they can help create a more open government. Contact information for elected officials can be found at <https://www.lwvsnm.org/whos-who/>.

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