



Government Accountability Project

**Phase One Report
September 2007**

Attorney General Bill McCollum

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Florida has a longstanding tradition of giving citizens open access to government. Indeed, the State Constitution defines and protects the public's right to know how government officials at all levels spend taxpayer dollars and make the decisions affecting our lives. It is how we hold government accountable.

This state is among the nation's leaders in providing for public access to government records. But, simply allowing access to records is no longer enough, in light of technological advances making it infinitely easier, cheaper, and more efficient to provide information to people far and wide. Rather, government should be proactive and use technology to push information out to the citizens, thereby making it more accessible and fully embracing the principle of open government.

The Attorney General's Office, in partnership with the University of Florida's Brechner Center for Freedom of Information, launched the Government Accountability Project (GAP) earlier this year to study public access to records at the local government level. The project's objective is to encourage and help local governments to provide information their citizens need but have difficulty obtaining. Taking the lead among state agencies, the Attorney General's Office created a GAP initiative web page on the Office's internet site and placed its outside counsel contracts online. Efforts are under way to do the same for all the agency's contracts.

Phase One of the GAP study involved a content analysis of the web sites of the 67 counties and school districts in Florida to determine the types of public records currently available online. Particular interest was paid to the availability of contracts and other records that enable citizens to see how their dollars are being spent. An additional area of focus was the extent to which local government web sites have clearly labeled liaisons or contacts for public records.

This report reveals our findings which will support the later phases of this project, including conducting citizen forums around the state on public records access, and collaborating with local government entities to increase access to records not readily available.

We hope you find this information helpful and that you continue to use Florida's open government laws to hold government accountable.

Sincerely,



Bill McCollum
Attorney General



Sandra Chance
Executive Director,
Brechner Center for Freedom of Information



The Government Accountability Project

In January 2007, when Bill McCollum took office as Florida's Attorney General, he assumed the helm of an agency that has a variety of responsibilities, unlike most other state agencies with narrow missions. The divisions of the Attorney General's Office include Economic Crimes, Medicaid Fraud, Antitrust Litigation, Office of Civil Rights, Opinions, Victim Services, Lemon Law Arbitration, General Civil Litigation, Criminal Appeals, and most recently, the Child Predator Cybercrime Unit. The Office also includes the Statewide Prosecutor.

Although it is not reflected on the organizational chart, the Attorney General's Office has also long served as the primary resource for state and local government entities, public officials, journalists and citizens with questions about Florida's open government laws. The Office has always provided guidance through published Attorney General Opinions. Since 1995, the Office has had the statutory responsibility to operate a Public Records Mediation Program which helps resolve disputes that sometimes arise when citizens and others request records from government agencies.

Attorney General McCollum quickly recognized that educating people about Florida's Sunshine Laws is one of the most important jobs his agency has. Believing firmly that government must be accountable to its citizens and should be proactive instead of passive in providing access to public records, the Attorney General set out to develop a program that would pave the way for greater access to government. The Government Accountability Project was born.

Also believing in the usefulness of partnering with other organizations, Attorney General McCollum reached out to the Brechner Center for Freedom of Information at the University of Florida. For thirty years, the Brechner Center has studied the open government laws and practices in all the states and has fought for the rights of citizens to have free and open access to government. The Center's director, Sandra Chance, who is an accomplished journalist, media lawyer and university professor, readily agreed to work with the Attorney General on the project. Together, they determined the project should focus on local government, where greater education and access are needed. The objective of the project is to encourage local government entities to use technology to proactively provide citizens with the records they need to hold public officials accountable.

The Government Accountability Project was officially launched in March 2007 during Sunshine Week. Intended to be a continuing collaborative effort of the Attorney General's Office and the Brechner Center to increase government access, the project will initially proceed in three phases.



Phase One, which is now complete, involved surveying local government web sites to determine the kinds of public records currently being provided to citizens online. Because Attorney General McCollum is particularly focused on government accountability, project analysts specifically looked for contracts, budgets, and any other records reflecting how taxpayer dollars are being spent and how agencies are operating. Also important to the Attorney General is that local government entities provide a contact for citizens seeking public records. Thus, project analysts assessed the extent to which local sites contained clearly labeled public records custodians or contacts.

In Phase Two of the project, the Attorney General's Office and the Brechner Center will conduct forums around the state to find out what types of records citizens need to hold their public officials accountable. And in Phase Three, the partners will work with local government entities to bridge the gap between what the public needs and what the entities provide.

In conjunction with the Government Accountability Project, and to serve as an example to state and local government entities, the Attorney General's Office is now posting many of its contracts and its budget online. To see these documents, please visit www.myfloridalegal.com and click on the "Accountability Project" link on the left side of the Home Page. Attorney General McCollum's goal is to include all agency contracts on the web site by the end of 2007, and to continue to post any other public records that citizens can use to hold his office accountable. Citizens are encouraged to use the online contact form to let the Attorney General know what other records you would find useful.



Government Accountability Project Phase One Mechanics and Findings

Five undergraduate students and a graduate research assistant in the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications, supervised by project director, Dr. Cory Armstrong, and two investigators, conducted a content analysis of the web sites of the 67 counties and school districts in Florida to determine the presence of local public records on these sites. The coding was completed between June 15, 2007, and July 15, 2007, and the results reflect what each web site contained at the time it was viewed by the researchers. Individual researchers spent approximately ten to fifteen minutes searching for public information on each web site using the provided links and not employing any search engines (if available).

The coding was limited to specific county commission and school board web sites and information contained within those domains. Links that sent users to other sites were not included in the study, as the governing body relinquished primary control over the information housed on another site. For example, counties which linked to an outside web site to handle their employment applications were not counted as providing that information.

Study results indicated that on average, 75 percent of the county and school districts have public records available on their sites. These records include contact information for officials and meeting agendas and schedules. As the records get more complex, fewer sites have information available. For example, in the area of particular focus for this study, the presence of public contracts, only 8.8 percent of counties and 21 percent of school districts have individual contracts available on their sites. Approximately 30 percent of counties and school districts have summaries or overviews of their contracts, but not the specific contracts. In addition, 57.5 percent of county sites and 51.5 percent of school district sites contain budgets or financial information.

Also notable was the overall absence of a clearly labeled public records custodian or contact on the web sites. While some sites provide a link to county "public records," only 14 percent of counties and 7 percent of school districts had a clearly labeled person in that position.



Table 1: Percentage of Florida County Web sites with Public Records Availability

Type of record	County Web sites
Contact Information for Officials	83.8%
Procedure manuals or How-to directions	82.4%
Upcoming Meeting Schedules	76.5%
Meeting Agendas	75.0%
Presence of non-government community info.	70.6%
Job/advisory board openings	69.1%
County demographic information	61.8%
Budgets or financial information	57.4%
Local ordinances	45.6%
RFPs/Bid specifications	45.6%
Meeting Minutes	44.1%
Audio/video availability of meetings	33.8%
Summaries of Existing Contracts	29.4%
Designated public records custodian	14.7%
Specific Contract Agreements	8.8 %

Table 2: Percentage of Florida School District Web sites with Public Records Availability

Type of record	School Dist. Web sites
Contact Information for Officials	92.5%
Job/advisory board openings	85.1%
Procedure manuals or How-to directions	80.6%
Upcoming Meeting Schedules	73.1%
Meeting Agendas	73.1%
Meeting Minutes	67.2%
Budgets or financial information	50.7%
District/County demographic information	49.3%
Presence of non-government community info.	43.9%
RFPs/Bid specifications	38.8%
FCAT scores (in aggregate)	34.3%
Summaries of Existing Contracts	28.4%
Specific Contract Agreements	20.9%
Audio/video availability of meetings	13.4%
Designated public records custodian	7.6%



Table 3: Florida County Web site addresses (used in the study)

County	County Web site
Alachua County	http://www.alachuacounty.us/
Baker County	http://www.bakercountyfl.org/
Bay County	http://www.bocc.co.bay.fl.us/
Bradford County	http://www.bradford-co-fla.org/
Brevard County	http://countygovt.brevard.fl.us/
Broward County	http://www.co.broward.fl.us/
Calhoun County	http://www.calhounco.org/index.htm
Charlotte County	http://www.charlottecountyfl.com/
Citrus County	http://www.bocc.citrus.fl.us/index.htm
Clay County	http://www.claycountygov.com/
Collier County	http://www.co.collier.fl.us/
Columbia County	http://www.columbiacountyfla.com/
DeSoto County	http://co.desoto.fl.us/gen/index2.html
Dixie County	http://dixie.fl.gov/
Duval County	http://www.coj.net/default.htm
Escambia County	http://www.co.escambia.fl.us/
Flagler County	http://www.flaglercounty.org/pages.php?PB=1
Franklin County	http://www.franklincountyflorida.com/
Gadsden County	http://www.gadsdenc.com/
Gilchrist County	http://gilchrist.fl.us/
Glades County	http://www.gladescofl.us/
Gulf County	http://www.gulfcountygovernment.com/
Hamilton County	http://www.hamiltoncountyflorida.com/
Hardee County	http://www.hardeecounty.net/
Hendry County	http://www.hendryfla.net/
Hernando County	http://www.co.hernando.fl.us/
Highlands County	http://www.hcbcc.net/
Hillsborough County	http://www.hillsboroughcounty.org/
Holmes County	http://www2.myfloridacounty.com/wps/wcm/connect/holmesclerk
Indian River County	http://www.ircgov.com/
Jackson County	http://www.jacksoncountyfl.com/
Jefferson County	http://www.co.jefferson.fl.us/
Lafayette County	http://www2.myfloridacounty.com/wps/wcm/connect/lafayetteclerk
Lake County	http://www.lakecountyfl.gov/
Lee County	http://www.lee-county.com/
Leon County	http://www.leoncountyfl.gov/
Levy County	http://www.levycounty.org/



Liberty County	http://www.freenet.tlh.fl.us/Liberty_County/
Madison County	http://www.madisonfl.org/
Manatee County	http://www.co.manatee.fl.us/
Marion County	http://www.marioncountyfl.org/
Martin County	http://www.martin.fl.us/portal/page?_pageid=213,1&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL
Miami-Dade County	http://miamidade.gov/wps/portal
Monroe County	http://monroecofl.virtualltownhall.net/Pages/index
Nassau County	http://www.nassauclerk.com/
Okaloosa County	http://www.co.okaloosa.fl.us/
Okeechobee County	http://www.floridatc.com/ok.html
Orange County	http://www.orangecountyfl.net/cms/default.htm
Osceola County	http://www.osceola.org/
Palm Beach County	http://www.co.palm-beach.fl.us/
Pasco County	http://www.pascocountyfl.net/
Pinellas County	http://www.pinellascounty.org/
Polk County	http://www.polk-county.net/
Putnam County	http://www1.putnam-fl.com/live/default.asp
Santa Rosa County	http://www.co.santa-rosa.fl.us/
Sarasota County	http://www.co.sarasota.fl.us/
Seminole County	http://www.seminolecountyfl.gov/
St. Johns County	http://www.co.st-johns.fl.us/
St. Lucie County	http://www.stlucieco.gov/
Sumter County	http://sumtercountyfl.gov/
Suwannee County	http://www.suwcounty.org/site/v4.5h/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1
Taylor County	http://www2.myfloridacounty.com/wps/wcm/connect/taylorclerk
Union County	http://www2.myfloridacounty.com/wps/wcm/connect/unionclerk
Volusia County	http://www.volusia.org/
Wakulla County	http://www.mywakulla.com/
Walton County	http://www.co.walton.fl.us/default.asp?ID=2
Washington County	http://www.washingtonfl.com/



Table 4: Florida School Districts Web sites addresses (used in the study)

Alachua County Schools	http://www.sbac.edu/
Baker County Schools	http://www.baker.k12.fl.us/
Bay County Schools	http://www.bay.k12.fl.us/
Bradford County Schools	http://www.mybradford.us/
Brevard County Schools	http://www.brevard.k12.fl.us/
Broward County Schools	http://www.browardschools.com/
Calhoun County Schools	http://www.paec.org/calhoun/district/
Charlotte County Schools	http://www.ccps.k12.fl.us/
Citrus County Schools	http://www.citrus.k12.fl.us/
Clay County Schools	http://www.clay.k12.fl.us/
Collier County Schools	http://www.collier.k12.fl.us/
Columbia County Schools	http://www.columbia.k12.fl.us/
DeSoto County Schools	http://www.desotoschools.com/
Dixie County Schools	http://dixieschools.dixie.k12.fl.us/
Duval County Schools	http://www.dreamsbeginhere.org/
Escambia County Schools	http://www.escambia.k12.fl.us/
Flagler County Schools	http://www.flagler.k12.fl.us/
Franklin County Schools	http://www.franklincountyschools.org/
Gadsden County Schools	http://www.gcps.k12.fl.us/
Gilchrist County Schools	http://www.gilchristschools.org/
Glades County Schools	http://www.firn.edu/schools/glades/glades/
Gulf County Schools	http://www.gulf.k12.fl.us/
Hamilton County Schools	http://www.firn.edu/schools/hamilton/hamilton/
Hardee County Schools	http://www.hardee.k12.fl.us/
Hendry County Schools	http://www.hendry-schools.org/education/district/district.php
Hernando County Schools	http://www.hcsb.k12.fl.us/
Highlands County Schools	http://www.highlands.k12.fl.us/
Hillsborough County Schools	http://www.sdhc.k12.fl.us/
Holmes County Schools	http://www.hdsb.org/
Indian River County Schools	http://www.indian-river.k12.fl.us/sites/main/
Jackson County Schools	http://web.jcsb.org/
Jefferson County Schools	http://www.firn.edu/schools/jefferson/jefferson/home.html
Lafayette County Schools	http://hornet.lafayette.k12.fl.us/
Lake County Schools	http://www.lake.k12.fl.us/LCSPortal/
Lee County Schools	http://www.lee.k12.fl.us/
Leon County Schools	http://www.leon.k12.fl.us/
Levy County Schools	http://www.levy.k12.fl.us/
Liberty County Schools	http://www.firn.edu/schools/liberty/liberty/



Madison County Schools	http://www.janusgroup.com/madison/
Manatee County Schools	http://www.manatee.k12.fl.us/
Marion County Schools	http://www.marion.k12.fl.us/
Martin County Schools	http://www.sbmc.org/
Miami-Dade County Schools	http://www2.dadeschools.net/index.htm
Monroe County Schools	http://www.monroe.k12.fl.us/
Nassau County Schools	http://www.nassau.k12.fl.us/
Okaloosa County Schools	http://www.okaloosaschools.com/okaloosaschools/
Okeechobee County Schools	http://ocsb.okee.k12.fl.us/index.html
Orange County Schools	http://www.ocps.k12.fl.us/
Osceola County Schools	http://www.osceola.k12.fl.us/
Palm Beach County Schools	http://www.palmbeach.k12.fl.us/
Pasco County Schools	http://www.pasco.k12.fl.us/
Pinellas County Schools	http://www.pinellas.k12.fl.us/
Polk County Schools	http://www.pcsb.k12.fl.us/
Putnam County Schools	http://www.putnamschools.org/
Santa Rosa County Schools	http://www.santarosa.k12.fl.us/
Sarasota County Schools	http://www.sarasota.k12.fl.us/
Seminole County Schools	http://www.scps.k12.fl.us/
St. Johns County Schools	http://www.stjohns.k12.fl.us/
St. Lucie County Schools	http://www.stlucie.k12.fl.us/
Sumter County Schools	http://www.sumter.k12.fl.us/sumterportal/index.htm
Suwannee County Schools	http://www.suwannee.k12.fl.us/
Taylor County Schools	http://www.taylor.k12.fl.us/
Union County Schools	http://www.union.k12.fl.us/main.htm
Volusia County Schools	http://www.volusia.k12.fl.us/
Wakulla County Schools	http://www.wakullaschooldistrict.org/
Walton County Schools	http://www.walton.k12.fl.us/
Washington County Schools	http://www.firn.edu/schools/washington/wash/