

Wide variety of records available to the public

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Public records are a powerful tool for investigative journalists, but they're available to anyone.

"In the spirit of Oregon law, what we do is open to the public," Pendleton city recorder Andrea Denton said. "Our meetings are open to the public, our records are open to the public, everything we do is in the public eye."

Public records include police reports, meeting minutes, contracts, salaries, budgets, emails, ordinances, schedules, deeds, maps and a long list of other records. In fact, Denton said, Oregon law considers everything generated by a government agency public record unless a bill is passed specifically exempting it from access.

The internet has made access easier than ever. People can always submit an official public records request, but these days Denton said most of Pendleton's records are searchable for free online — no paperwork required.

Steve Churchill, public records officer for Umatilla County, said his office most often helps people find copies of marriage records and property deeds. Some people choose to drop by and search through old records themselves, while the office also fields 10 to 20 email requests per day. Churchill said most requests are filled the same day.

While newer records are available in digital form, the county also has a large archive on paper.

"We have deeds going back to 1862, and there are several hundred thousand," he said.

Churchill said it can be time-consuming to locate a record when people say



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Old bound books filled with the county courts dockets sit on a shelf in the basement of the Umatilla County Courthouse along with other county documents.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Rows of Oregon state court records are stored in a storage room in the basement of the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton.

they're looking for something that they know exists sometime in a 30-year timespan.

"The more you know, the

better," he said. "Dates are important because we have records going back so far."

About 7.6 percent of public records requests

come from professional journalists, according to the Columbia Journalism Review. Churchill said title company employees, peo-

ple in the real estate business and companies looking to locate in the area frequently use land use records in their work. Other people are looking for their family's history or their own records.

One record people often request from the county is birth records, but Churchill said those are actually maintained at the state level and must be requested through the Oregon Health Authority.

Lilly Alarcon-Strong, city recorder for Hermiston, said most requests for city records in Hermiston can be submitted through her, but the police department and municipal courts handle requests for their own documents. A public records request form can be found online at hermiston.or.us/public-records or in person at city hall.

She said some people are habitual records requesters. American Transparency, a national nonprofit dedicated to track government spending, has a regular schedule of records requests for all of the city's purchasing contracts and other financial information. They add that information to their searchable database at www.openthebooks.com.

The *Hermiston Herald* frequently uses public records, including budgets and memos to city councilors, in its reporting on Hermiston and other city governments.

Alarcon-Strong said Hermiston is working to digitize its older public records using the Oregon Records Management Solution provided by the state, which will not only allow people to access records from their home for free, but will also make them searchable by keywords.

Plenty of more current public records, from recordings of city council meetings to building permits, are already available online. While people often tout the idea of needing transparency in government, Alarcon-Strong said most people don't take advantage of what is already there.

When the city voted to increase water and sewer rates starting March 1, for example, the council discussed it in open meetings, there were several newspaper articles about it, the city posted about it to social media and put notices in everyone's water bill. Despite those efforts, there are still people "who come in and they have no idea."

"There is just so much stuff people want to know, but they have to make the effort to get the information," she said. "... There is only so much we can do to push the word out."

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