

'Your Right to Know'

League of Women Voters discusses open records, meeting laws

By Rebecca Walter

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North Carolina's open records and meeting laws were the focal point of the League of Women Voters Henderson County's "Your Right to Know" program Thursday afternoon at the Hendersonville Co-Op.

Bill Moss, editor and publisher of the Hendersonville Lightning, along with founder and Executive Director of Carolina Public Press Angie Newsome were the guest speakers, sharing their wide-ranging knowledge and experience with open records and meeting laws with the nearly 50 attendees.

Sunshine laws, both at the state and federal level, are the strongest tools the public has to hold elected officials accountable, and everything

about enacting them has been a fight, Newsome said. They are important to the public as a whole and not an issue specific to journalists, she added.

"Open records are not a partisan issue. Open government is not a partisan issue," Newsome said.

Moss pointed out that with fewer statehouse reporters watching politicians, the importance of transparency and access has increased.

Moss' career in journalism spans nearly 43 years and multiple states. North Carolina by far has the worst open records laws in terms of access, he said.

Henderson County officials have a reputation of being knowledgeable and transparent with open records, Moss said. Road blocks can pop up in other areas of the community, like hospitals or in regard to personnel records.

When seeking public information, those searching are not required to follow any specific government process, Newsome explained. Requests can be made informally through email, calls or in person.

Following guidelines can be helpful, however, and it's crucial to be specific in a request. The open requests filed through Newsome's nonprofit news organization are written out and submitted.

If a request is too broad, it can take a long time to process and costs can rack up, Newsome said. Filers should make a point to ask for records electronically if possible.

Since North Carolina's laws do not provide for civil or criminal penalties for not fulfilling an open records request, a challenge has to be brought before a court in hopes of a changed outcome.

A written, specific request that goes in front of a judge can better prove a case and the information being sought, Newsome said.

If a request is denied, the entity needs to cite the reasons why under the law, which is complex and interrupted in different ways.

Going to court is not the desired outcome but can be necessary when public information is withheld, Newsome said. CPP has sued different entities in the state, including Asheville City Council, to gain access to information.

Most record requests are fulfilled, Newsome added, but it's the ones that aren't that get to her.

Reporters do not have more rights or access to information than the rest of the general public, Newsome emphasized.

"Journalists are not special," she said.

Attendees asked Moss and Newsome multiple questions, including how many requests they typically file, if information is ever leaked to them and what they would like added to the open records law. Moss said he would like to see a constitutional amendment with stronger language defining the process. "It is a heavy rock up a steep hill," Moss said of the change process.

League members asked how they could get more information and training about open records laws. Programs and training can be offered by the North Carolina Press Association and CPP. The N.C. Open Government Coalition's sunshine center also has information.

For more information about the LWV and their events, go to [www. lwvhc.org](http://www.lwvhc.org).