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PLATTE CHAT

NEBRASKA COUNTY GOVERNMENT: OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

We may be in the midst of the Information Age, but don't tell that to the nearly 42,000 Nebraska residents who have no way of finding out about their county government via the most prevalent source of information today – the Internet.

[A study recently completed by SunshineReview.org](#) indicated roughly 42,000 Nebraskans can't access any information about their county government on the Internet. According to the report, [Arthur](#), [Boyd](#), [Grant](#), [Harlan](#), [Logan](#), [McPherson](#), [Sheridan](#) and [Wheeler](#) counties in Nebraska don't have an official web site. The study also shows that even though [Brown](#) and [Dawson](#) counties do have web sites, there is no information available in the 10 key areas examined.

As a whole, Nebraska ranked near the bottom of all 50 states in the study. SunshineReview.org took a look at all the county government websites in every state and charted and ranked them in 10 key areas; namely budget, meetings, elected officials, administrative officials, permits and zoning, audits, contracts, lobbying, public records and

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taxes.

Rural geography and sparse population is no excuse. The report also includes boroughs in Alaska and parishes in Louisiana. And, yes, Vermont, Rhode Island and Connecticut are included in the rankings even though they do not have county government. Those three states simply occupy the bottom three spots in the rankings.

The Cornhusker State ranked 42nd out of the 50 states in the amount of information counties make available on the internet – and remember, three of the states ranking below Nebraska do not have county government.

SunshineReview.org found that Nebraska counties make approximately 16% of all possible information available. The unfavorable rating of Nebraska counties is most apparent when compared to the ranking of counties in states bordering the Cornhusker state: Colorado (35%), Wyoming (31%), Iowa (33%), South Dakota (25%), Kansas (19%) and Missouri (18%).

The five states whose counties have the overall highest website rankings are:

- | | |
|---------------|--------|
| 1. Arizona | 65.50% |
| 2. California | 64.35% |
| 3. Florida | 56.28% |
| 4. Washington | 55.00% |
| 5. Maryland | 52.55% |

On the bright side of the study, Nebraska's two most populous counties – [Douglas](#) and [Lancaster](#) – each get good marks from the study. Of all the counties in Nebraska, only [Douglas](#) and [Lancaster](#) have complete budget and contract information available. [Lancaster](#) and [Sarpy](#) Counties are the only two of the 93 counties to make complete audit information available and only [Fillmore](#) County makes complete lobbying information available.

Meanwhile, not a single Nebraska county makes complete public records available online; only 12% of the counties have complete permit and zoning information available and only 21% of the counties have complete tax information. Nebraska counties do fairly well in the information areas of meeting schedules (52%), listing of administration officials (74%), and information pertaining to elected officials (95%).

The importance of government transparency and accountability is the same regardless if you are a one of the 450,000 living in Douglas County or one of the 350 living in Arthur County. And given the fact that Arthur County is more than twice the geographical size of Douglas County, one could almost argue that the more sparsely populated counties have a greater need for easily accessible information.

Government entities – you know, those things Abraham Lincoln said were, “of the people, by the people and for the people ...” – should make it a priority to provide information as efficiently as possible to the people it serves. Nebraskans deserve – and should demand – better from its county governments.

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