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Winsted government becoming more open

In his May 2 letter to the editor, Mr. Gouthier states that he was unable to obtain a copy of the proposed budget from the town clerk's office and claims this indicates lack of openness of local government.

The Winchester Charter requires that sufficient copies of the budget be available for distribution in the offices of the town clerk and the town manager at least 15 days prior to the annual town meeting.

This office did not receive complaints form anyone, including Mr. Gouthier, regarding the availability of the budget. In checking on Mr. Gouthier's complaint after reading his letter to the editor, I discovered that Town Manager David Maynard had copies of the budget, as well as a synopsis of it, available for distribution, as does acting Town Manager Paul Vayer. The town clerk did not have copies for distribution at that time, but he does now.

All citizens are encouraged to contact this office, and many have, when public officials refuse to provide information to which they are entitled by the charter or the Freedom of Information Act.

Mr. Gouthier's second concern is that Democrats are planning to caucus before Board of Selectmen meetings. The Freedom of Information Act defines a "meeting" as any gathering of a quorum of a public agency to discuss or act upon public matters. The act exempts from this definition a "caucus" of members of a single political party even when the members constitute a quorum of a public agency.

The law permits members of political parties to gather and discuss public issues in private if it is called a caucus. It should not surprise anyone, especially Mr. Gouthier, that both the Democrats and the Republicans caucus to discuss public issues. The caucus exception to the Freedom of Information Act is troubling for citizens who seek open government and accountability; the potential for abuse is self-evident. This situation requires all citizens to be vigilant as they were in the recent past with the previous Board of Selectmen.

Finally, Mr. Gouthier's opinion that local government lacks openness is refuted by evidence to the contrary. More citizens, including younger citizens, are familiar with the Freedom of Information Act, and some have used it.

More citizens are aware of the charter and many of its provisions. Many more citizens now regularly view meetings of the selectmen and the Board of Education thanks to Mad River TV, the public access cable station. There are fewer executive sessions and more thorough explanations of public issues.

These examples reflect an increased interest in and understanding of the workings of local government which build citizen confidence. Citizens who know how their local government works know how to participate in the process, know what to expect of their public officials, know how to hold them accountable, know what to demand for their tax dollars and are alert to recognize when open government is undermined.

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Winsted