

WV
3/10/94

Protocol

By Charlene LaVoie

This is the second topic in the Protocol series intended to help citizens understand the procedures of their government in order to strengthen their democratic skills. In the last issue of the Winsted Voice, the right of initiative, or citizens right to propose laws, was presented.

Freedom of Information is perhaps the most important protocol. Good citizens study and evaluate their governors, challenge their decisions when appropriate and vote for change when needed. But no citizen can carry out these responsibilities when government is conducted in secret.

James Madison, the fourth President of the United States, was an ardent supporter of the public's right to know. In 1756, he said,

"A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

Although Madison was born over two centuries ago, it was not until 1966 that the Congress passed legislation signed into law by President Johnson, which made most information collected by the government available to the public. The Act permits people to obtain information from the government subject to nine exemptions. These include the areas of national security, trade secrets and ongoing investigation records.