

GARDEN HACKS

SOME GARDENING TIPS MIGHT SOUND BRILLIANT ON THE SURFACE, BUT DIG DEEPER AND YOU'LL FIND MANY BELONG IN THE COMPOST PILE. **D2**

Sunday

Muskegon Chronicle

AMERICA'S 250TH

America deserves transparency — Michigan leaders choose secrecy



Chris Morris, Advance Local illustration

A 1976 political compromise has made Michigan an outlier on government openness.

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The first version of Michigan's Freedom of Information Act proposed in 1976 would have opened up the records of the state Legislature and the governor's office to public scrutiny.

But, by the time the bill was signed by Gov. William Milliken at the close of the country's bicentennial year, mention of legislators had been removed and a clause added specifically exempting the governor, lieutenant governor and their staffers.

Perry Bullard, the liberal state representative from Ann Arbor who sponsored the bill, defended the changes in the press, telling United Press International that opening up the governor's office and Legislature to that sort of scrutiny would "cripple the functioning of the legislative and executive branches."

But Edward Petrini, an attorney with the Public Interest Research Group in Michigan who participated in drafting the original bill, said at the time that the deletions were "pure political expediency."

It has proven to be an enduring piece of political expediency.

Five decades later, as the country marks its semiquincentennial, Michigan is one of just two states that still exempt their gov-

ernors and legislatures from disclosing the documents of their day-to-day work to the general public.

If Massachusetts voters approve a citizen-led initiative heading to the ballot in November, Michigan will be the only one. Just why that is isn't perfectly clear.

RECENT ATTEMPTS

Extending Michigan's Freedom of Information Act to the governor and Legislature apparently has broad and bipartisan support. Bills to extend FOIA to one or the other or both have been put forward in every legislative session for the past 20 years. On a few occasions, those bills have passed in one chamber of the Legislature.

Two such bills passed the state Senate with overwhelming support last year.

Republican House Speaker Matt Hall, of Richland Township, hasn't allowed them to go to a vote in the House.

"If 48 other states can figure out how to shine light on their decision making and give the taxpayers a better understanding of these decisions that government makes, surely Michigan can, too," said state Sen. Jeremy Moss, a Southfield Democrat who has been sponsoring bills to expand the FOIA law since 2015. "I wish we were writing novel legislation. I wish we were breaking barriers here. We're fighting to be one of the last states to do this."

1766-1966

The first country in the world to embrace the principle of public access to government documents was Sweden, which ratified the

first version of its Freedom of the Press Act in 1766.

The second was the United States, 200 years later.

"Sweden influenced basically nobody else," said Michael Schudson, a professor of journalism at Columbia University and the author of "The Rise of the Right to Know."

That's including the Founding Fathers.

It's not uncommon for modern Americans to imagine that our notions of openness as part and parcel of a democratic society were there from the country's founding. They were not.

Virginia prosecuted a printer in the 1600s for printing the laws of the colony.

The U.S. Senate essentially met in secret for the first several years of its existence.

The U.S. House of Representatives only made representatives' votes on amendments to bills part of the public record in 1970.

The early American republic was "a different world," Schudson said. "Deference was the virtue of a citizen."

It was, instead, the extensive social upheavals of the 1960s that produced demands for greater openness and greater government accountability.

The fight for civil rights, women's rights, LGBT rights "directly or indirectly made people think differently about publicness and who is the government to tell us that we as the citizens of democratic society cannot have some right to information that our citizenship has helped create," Schudson said.

SEE TRANSPARENCY, A3

MICHIGAN HEALTH

Hospitals say efforts to curb prices threaten nonprofit status

Some say bills, if they pass, would force facility closures and 21,600 job losses.

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Hospitals say proposed legislation seeking to control their pricing and threatening their nonprofit status would result in facility closures, staffing cuts and reduced services.

One in four Michigan hospitals already operate with negative margins. Industry representatives estimate that number would double, and as many as 21,600 full-time jobs would be lost, if bills introduced in the state House pass and are signed into law.

"If enacted, these bills will increase costs and threaten access to care by forcing service cuts, workforce reductions and hospital closures, especially in rural communities," said Brian Peters, CEO of the Michigan Health & Hospital Association.

While true that nearly a quarter of hospitals are struggling financially, the other 77% reported operating profit margins of at least 10% in 2024, and large urban systems averaged a margin around 20%, according to Brett Jackson, president of the Michigan Health Purchasers Coalition, which represents employers and other purchasers of health care across the state.

"We recognize that some rural and financially challenged hospitals face unique circumstances and deserve thoughtful support," Jackson said. "However, the data shows that many of Michigan's largest health systems are generating substantial and growing profits."

The bills drawing hospital leaders' attention were introduced recently by House Republicans. The package proposed creation of a hospital cost review board to sign off on price increases and mergers/acquisitions. It would require hospitals to reduce their prices to maintain the non-profit status that allows them to avoid paying taxes.

SEE MICHIGAN HEALTH, A2

IN YESTERDAY'S EDITION

Portraits show the faces of Electric Forest

At Electric Forest, the portraits tell the story: face paint, glitter, body art and elaborate costumes turn the Double JJ Resort into a runway of self-expression.

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