

## Jane Briggs-Bunting: Salary database is important part of monitoring our government

The disclosure of the salaries (along with the names) of state employees is generating howls of complaints from employees upset that their names are linked with their salaries and employment grade.

At the certain risk of having those howls directed toward me, I applaud the LSJ for putting this legally public information on its Web site and performing its watchdog role as a newspaper should. Open government is essential to a democracy and important for Michigan, especially now.

These are tough times in Michigan. The Legislature and the governor are attempting to balance the state's budget, as Michigan's Constitution requires. This is not the federal government where deficit spending can go into the trillions. (As of 10:20 a.m. last Friday, the national debt was \$8,815,717,404,790.28).

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It remains vitally important the citizens of this state know down to the penny what we are paying all of our employees. We are still a government of the people, by the people and for the people. It's not the state of Michigan, Inc. Every taxpayer in the state is a shareholder.

Bottom line: State employees, including me (an MSU faculty member), all work for the people of Michigan. Any member of the public should be able to walk in the door of any state, county, city, village, township, university or school district office during regular business hours and ask for this very same information and receive it.

Michigan's Freedom of Information Act requires this information be public, as it should be. Too bad we need a law to ensure the people get to see at least some of the people's business, but we do - or this information would never have been released.

The LSJ had to file a FOIA request with the Michigan Department of Civil Service, and received the information promptly and without charge - both results a rarity these days.

That's a surprise to me, since MSU journalism students had many difficulties this past semester trying to pry public records out of the 83 counties and the intermediate school districts around the state. The vast majority of students waited weeks to get information, and many were told they could not have it. FOIA requires public bodies to respond in five business days, and they are allowed to request an additional 10 days. The reality is it often takes much, much longer to get this information, which is required by the law to be disclosed.

In 1977, when FOIA was passed, the Legislature had the wisdom to clearly acknowledge: "It is the public policy of this state that all persons ... are entitled to full and complete information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts of those who represent them as public officials and public employees ... The people shall be informed so that they may fully participate in the democratic process."

I fully expect that Michigan's public universities' salaries will go up on the LSJ data site soon, as they should. To save everyone the effort of looking mine up, I make \$125,993.

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