

'You put a hit piece out on me,' says the Latah sheriff

Lee Rozen/Moscow-Pullman Daily News Editorial Board

The government belongs to us; we don't belong to it.

But because we are busy making a living, raising kids, volunteering and seeing that grandma is OK, we have little time to hold it accountable for its actions.

Daily News reporters, by going to meetings and checking public records, can tell us when the City Council plans to raise our utility fees, why police cars were at our neighbors, how bad that highway wreck was or whether a public official is doing the job our taxes pay for.

Some government officials don't appreciate this; most do.

Three recent incidents snap this into focus.

- A clerk in the Whitman County courthouse, perhaps feeling protective of other officials, refused to provide the Daily News the names and phone numbers for the county's junior taxing districts - fire, water, school, hospital - and tried to quiz us on why we wanted them. Those public records must be provided to a newspaper - or you, no questions asked.
- The police chief in Lewiston decided only reporters who showed up at a crime scene or who submitted written questions Monday through Friday between noon and 1 p.m. would get more information about what his officers were doing. For years, there and elsewhere, reporters have called dispatchers and officers to clarify confusing or missing facts on the police log.
- On June 29, Latah County Sheriff Wayne Rausch stopped faxing even the log of sheriff's calls to the Daily News. That was the day we ran a story letting Rausch explain that his house was being foreclosed as part of a 2012 bankruptcy stemming from a more than \$100,000 debt that went back to his first election as sheriff in 2004. We think the public needs to know anytime any elected official who spends the public's money wisely has trouble managing his own.

He thought it unfair.

A couple of days ago, he began releasing the logs to the Daily News again, but told us:

"This policy changed because the Moscow-Pullman Daily News seems to think that they can print anything they want and there's no ramifications. ... the consequences are when you put a hit piece out on me - and that's exactly what you did and you know it - I don't feel like being kind to the Moscow-Pullman Daily News anymore, and I'm not going to."

Wednesday, his department refused to answer any questions without a formal public records request about an injury collision involving an arrest, two drug arrests, three drunk driving arrests, two arrests for other driving offenses, two burglaries, a theft, a hit-and-run and eight medical calls, among other things.

In the end, the clerk, the chief and the sheriff are putting out a hit on your ability to get public information.