

VORDERBRUEGGEN: Transparency paramount in government

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Contra Costa department chiefs are in a proper lather over Supervisor John Gioia's proposal to post online all reports, letters and emails sent to and from majorities of the board and its 87 policy advisory boards.

No, that was not a typo. The supervisors really have 87 policy committees. But that's a subject for another day.

Dumping thousands of files onto the Internet would be too much extra work for already overburdened workers, managers say. The county would have to buy more server space.

And people write nasty and untrue stuff about staff and supervisors that would live forever on the Internet. Who would police these documents for libel and slander?

"We do have to look at workload and server space," Gioia said. "But the issue of department heads being concerned about this stuff being on the Internet should not be compelling factor in our decision. Whoever said that openness and transparency wouldn't be controversial wasn't paying attention. Democracy is messy."

It's also the law and the county has been breaking it for years.

Under the county's 1995 Better Government ordinance, the supervisors and every one of their policy bodies must maintain a file accessible to the public that contains copies of all letters, memos and other communication sent to or received from quorum of the body.

This so-called public access file is a wooden press box in the Clerk of the Board's office in Martinez, a repository of stale agenda packets that contain nowhere near the body of documents prescribed by the law. (A former colleague once described how he reshuffled newsworthy stuff to the bottom of the box to thwart competitors. Nice.)

Every bit of this contested correspondence is already public information subject to disclosure under the state Public Records Act, but it's hard to know what to ask for if you don't even know it exists.

Posting public documents online is the only viable option if the county is serious about transparency.