

Sunshine in Government Initiative

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Media Groups Urge Senate To Act on OPEN Government Bill

The ten media organizations comprising the Sunshine in Government Initiative (SGI) sent a letter today to the Senate leadership urging the Senate to vote on bipartisan, common sense reforms to strengthen the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

The House already approved similar legislation (H.R. 1309) by an overwhelming vote of 308-117. The Openness Promotes Effectiveness in our National Government Act, or OPEN Government Act (S. 849), was unanimously reported out of the Senate Judiciary Committee on a voice vote. The legislation could come up for a vote on the Senate floor before the Memorial Day congressional recess.

The OPEN Government Act makes simple, common sense reforms to the way federal agencies process requests for documents under FOIA. Among its improvements, the legislation:

- Creates a tracking system and hotline for requesters
- Restores meaningful deadlines for agency action and imposes real consequences on federal agencies for missing statutory deadlines.
- Creates an ombudsman to help requesters use FOIA and avoid and resolve disputes
- Ensures that, whenever requesters must sue the government and litigation causes agencies to release documents, the government reimburses the requester's legal costs.

We urge the Senate to pass this bipartisan, good government legislation. Despite its flaws, the FOIA still is an important tool to keep the public informed. In May 2007 alone the law has helped the public learn that:

- Construction equipment interfered with navigation equipment at one of America's busiest airports
- Safety violations plagued the driver and tanker involved in an accident causing the collapse of a freeway interchange near San Francisco
- A Defense Department espionage warning that transmitters embedded in unique-looking coins had been planted on U.S. contractors turned out to be a false alarm; the coins were commemorative Canadian quarters

The Sunshine in Government Initiative is a coalition of ten media groups promoting open and accountable government. For a copy of the letter and more information, visit www.sunshineingovernment.org.