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Towns should have to put more on the Web

The state should pass a law mandating that local meeting agendas and minutes be posted online.

In Connecticut, state lawmakers just put into effect a law that says towns must put certain information on their municipal Web sites. Specifically, Connecticut towns now must post the agendas for public board and commission meetings online at least 24 hours before the meetings are held. Towns are also required to post the minutes of public meetings online so residents who couldn't attend can read what happened.

New Jersey ought to have the same law. This is the 21st century. The Internet is one of the great tools we have for disseminating information and achieving transparency in government. Unlike a town hall, it's open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In this day and age, every town should be required to have an official Web site and to post certain things on that site, including contact information for town officials, the municipal budget and public meeting agendas and minutes.

In Connecticut, some small towns have shut down their Web sites in response to that state's law. The towns say they don't have the staff to post meeting agendas and minutes online. First Selectwoman Barbara Henry of Roxbury, Conn., told the Associated Press that most city hall employees in her town only work part-time and it would be impossible for them to post all the mandated information on the Web site on time.

Ah, but this is New Jersey, where virtually every municipal government has full-time employees. Having only part-timers shouldn't be an excuse.

Still, Trenton hands down a lot of unfunded mandates to towns, and this could be another.

To do the bill right, some money should be provided for training two or three employees in every town hall on how to post documents on their towns' Web sites. Most small towns don't have an information technology person on staff. But county governments should have an IT staff, and they should be required to offer help to municipal employees when problems arise putting agendas and minutes online.

There's no excuse for government not giving citizens full access to information about public meetings. The Internet is by far the best means to do that.

No doubt there will be some municipal employees who will want to resist what they perceive as extra work. But their job is to serve the public, and the public is most definitely served by having greater access to government through the Web.

New Jersey should pass a law similar to Connecticut's and make sure to provide resources to help towns put documents on their Web sites, not shut the sites down because they don't want to make the effort or are afraid they'll get sued.

If you agree, contact your state senator and Assembly members.