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Activist: Hardyston has transparent government

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HARDYSTON -- According to an open records advocate, one Sussex County municipality stands above the rest when it comes to transparency in government.

Martin O'Shea, who also is a retired journalist, offers high praise for Hardyston Township and its manager, Marianne Smith.

"I find her an administrator on the cutting edge," he said. "The fact is she's quite receptive to doing things in a truly transparent way." "The Hardyston Township Council has been proactive in reviewing their policies relative to public records, access and record-keeping practices in the interest of the public's right to access of records within the boundaries of the law,"

Smith said. "There is a general sentiment that there is a benefit to the public and to the operation of government when everyone is able to be educated and informed on the issues.

To that end, the council has been open-minded in their review and policy development and endeavoring to make decisions relative to public records access that are in the best interest of the public."

O'Shea said he approached the Hardyston Council several months ago to speak to members about the importance of transparency and the costs of copies and compact discs charged to the public.

"The Open Public Records Act says you should only be charging the actual cost but most municipalities around the state don't accept that theory," he said. "But Hardyston had already done it. They were one step ahead of me."

In addition, Smith said the township reviewed its cost analysis for copies and reduced them to 10 cents per copy, in keeping with the actual cost of the copy to the township.

They also developed a comprehensive e-mail policy for staff, elected officials and volunteers. "We created e-mail addresses for all staff and elected officials that is accessible by municipal office staff who are authorized to respond to OPRA requests,"

Smith said. "We are also creating e-mail addresses for volunteer fire department and first aid squads to be used for official business relating to the volunteer agencies."

O'Shea said the township also is getting ready to experiment with taping its executive sessions. "It will be startling if they do begin to tape the sessions," he said. "I can't tell you the stupid excuses I've been told about why it can't be done. I've had council members say to me 'we can't do that, I swear in those meetings.'

I say watch your mouth, that's the answer." In executive sessions it is a natural thing for councils and committees to talk about things that don't belong there, he added. "Recording executive sessions is an area of municipal government that should be discussed and changed," he said.

O'Shea said it is rare to meet someone like Marianne Smith. "Most of the time you get elected officials and what you get from them is that they want open government and transparency but then when it comes time to act they vote against it."