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Residents can shine light on government

It's Sunshine Week -- dedicated to open government. Be sure your public servants are operating in the open.

Thomas Jefferson told us that "the price of freedom is eternal vigilance."

That comment covers many possible threats to freedom, but it's safe to bet that one of the threats Jefferson was speaking of was government secrecy.

During this week -- Sunshine Week -- we urge South Jerseyans to take a closer look at the public information that's out there and ask questions.

We've made huge amounts of information available via Data Universe at courierpostonline.com/datauniverse. Visit the site for details on:

State government employees and their salaries

Average property taxes, by municipality

Real-estate transactions

Public school teacher salaries

Some N.J. workers' overtime pay

Police and firefighter salaries

Public school bus inspection reports

Much more

It's a treasure trove of information that can help you better understand where your tax dollars are going -- and likely will make you wonder whether those dollars are being used as wisely as they should be.

And that's really the goal: To get New Jersey residents to question their government until they get real answers.

But as fantastic as all the information is, it ends up creating as many questions as it answered.

Why, for example, does the Courier-Post, other New Jersey newspapers and residents need to make repeated requests through the state's Open Public Records Act to pry this kind of information from the government?

If these are, indeed, open public records (and they are), then why is the government creating hurdles

to residents' requests for the information?

We're glad New Jersey has taken steps in the past decade to make government records more open. We're glad there is a process laid out to help residents get through the maze of red tape that surrounds most requests for government records.

But New Jersey government employees still don't seem to get the idea that they are public servants, which means they work for us. Residents and their needs must be the No. 1 priority for government workers at the state, county, local and school district levels.

So take some time this week and learn a little more about your government. If you have questions, we strongly encourage you to ask them to your elected officials -- and tell us what kind of response you get.