

This is Sunshine Week, when advocates of open government highlight the value of freedom of information.

Candidates for auditor differ on open records



For the full interviews, go to www.ncopengov.org. Also, Ryan Teague Beckwith will be blogging all week on open government at dome.newsobserver.com.

In interviews conducted for the N.C. Open Government Coalition, candidates for statewide office recently answered questions about freedom of information. The responses of candidates for state auditor to selected questions are below; all week, we'll be publishing interviews with candidates for other jobs. For the full interviews, go to www.ncopengov.org. Also, Ryan Teague Beckwith will be blogging all week on open government at dome.newsobserver.com.

CANDIDATES

QUESTIONS

For the office of state auditor

Are there any changes you'd like in the public records and open meetings laws?

Do you think North Carolina's open meetings and public records laws make the duties and responsibilities of public officials and agencies clear?

The state public records law says that records must be released in a "reasonable" time period after a request. How would you define reasonable?

Should the personnel law be changed so that the public knows why its employees have been fired, dismissed, suspended or demoted? Should it be changed so that the public knows the entire salary information of its employees, not just the most recent increase/decrease?

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES



Fred Aikens
retired
Army colonel

"I think the one thing the open records law kind of misses is there are a lot of meetings inside agencies that are really talking about policy development and execution ... at some point, those agencies ought to be able to open it up to the public before you trumpet it out there." He said the recent problems with the mental-health system might have been averted with more public input.

No. "My personal opinion, as a deputy and chief deputy in state government, if I say there's no harm in releasing this data - guess what, there's a [public information officer] over here saying let's talk about this. There's a friction, tug of war, in the agencies. Sometimes the law is vague and doesn't speak to the specific circumstances you're going to encounter."

"Some requests you can turn around in 24, 48 hours. Some things you can't. ... It depends on the circumstances."

"I think where there is criminal misconduct, yes, perhaps so. But where there is not, you don't want to damage a person for life, and that's the line that I'd draw. I don't want to kill anyone's career because they've done something that's a one-time thing. Salary-wise, my attitude is, hey, you're a public employee, the information's out there anyway. It should be public."



Beth A. Wood
former employee
in auditor's office

She said that she would like to limit executive sessions by all levels of government. "I just can't imagine what goes on in those meetings that the public can't know about. And frankly, that, as a citizen, would worry me."

"I don't know, not having read the law."

"Reasonable from a citizen's standpoint would be a couple of weeks. Reasonable from an agency's standpoint depends on the number of employees and the number of requests they've got. It may be longer than that. So it depends on which side of the table you're sitting on." She said two weeks would be her target.

Information about why upper-level employees have been fired, she said, should be available. However, she said that information about all other employees should not be public. She said that she would not support increasing the amount of information regarding salaries. "Knowing what they make right now and what their last increase was is enough."

REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES



Leslie Merritt
state auditor

"No, I think it's pretty fair. I think we're always going to have little things here and there - gray areas - but I don't know of anything that I'd change."

Yes. "I think the law is pretty clear that any meeting is open unless you've got some other law that would trump that. ... I think it's pretty clear, and that would not only be for meetings but for records."

"It means as timely as you possibly can. At times you have to take care you don't release something [you shouldn't]. ... That means a pretty quick turnaround time."

Merritt said that there was already a "pretty good amount" of information regarding salary available. Regarding the reason someone was fired: "You've got to have a balance here again with personal privacy and the taxpayer interest ... as far as if someone is fired or demoted or something like that, some of that really should be private. ... Really, people are entitled to some privacy. Now, if it's an elected official or somebody like that, that can skew it."