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# Observance stresses public's right to know

**L**ast week was Sunshine Week, but it obviously had nothing to do with the weather. It was a national initiative that stresses open government and freedom of information.

There probably aren't many of us living in southeastern Michigan who are unaware of the text-message scandal that has rocked Detroit and its mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick.

While credit certainly goes to the Detroit Free Press for being the first media outlet to provide the public with a view of some of the dealings between Mayor Kilpatrick and his former chief of staff, Christine Beatty, much of the information now revealed is a result of Michigan's Freedom of Information Act.

While the mayor tried his best to hide his private agreement to settle lawsuits by two police officers for \$8.4 million, the FOIA request rendered his effort fruitless.

The general public, however, is more often than not unaware of the rights provided under the FOIA.

While it is often used by the media to research and obtain information that some public officials would rather keep secret, the FOIA applies to everyone — not just those of us in the media.

Upset with your property tax bill? You can research what others in similar-size homes pay in your community.

Heard something about your school officials spending lavishly at an out-of-town convention? That information is also available.

Want to know how much the elected officials in your town are being paid? Send in a request.

As part of its celebration of Sunshine Week, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy is launching an initiative aiming "to open up the check registers of Michigan's public school districts and place them in a comprehensible form on the Internet."

While we have not always agreed with some of the positions of the conservative think tank, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy should be praised for its efforts.

"Michigan spends about \$19 billion a year in local, state and federal tax dollars on public education," said Kenneth M. Braun, a policy analyst with the center. "That's quite a significant number when you realize that the state's total budget is \$43 billion. Anything school districts can do to be open about how they spend tax dollars will enhance people's confidence and promote accountability."

You can't argue with that — or the fact that the public is better served with cooperative efforts between tax-supported agencies and the media.

And our freedom of information laws are enormously helpful.