

A seminar on the topic of Indiana's Open Door Law and the Access to Public Records Act (APRA) was held on the evening of Thursday, April 5, in the Pekin Shelter House at Pekin Park.

The meeting was hosted by Rhonda Greene of IndianaProud.com and led by Katie Williams-Briles, who works for the office of the Indiana Public Access Counselor.

The Open Door Law (also known as the "Sunshine" Law) states that the governing entity of a public agency must conduct any official business in an open environment and allow the public to sit in on meetings and even record them if they choose to. It also emphasizes the fact that agencies must make the public well aware of their meetings by posting notices at least 48 hours in advance.

The APRA takes things a step further by granting citizens the right to access a public agency's records, by official request, of course. Governing bodies are encouraged to comply with any reasonable requests for information in as timely a manner as possible.

The purpose of this seminar was to educate Washington County residents about how these complex public access laws work, what purposes they serve and how agencies and governing leaders can easily avoid making costly mistakes.

"Recent legislation has changed now," Williams-Briles informed those in attendance, "which basically allows courts to fine individuals proven to be deliberately or intentionally breaking the Open Door Law." Tougher versions of the Open Door Law have been causing waves throughout the Indiana State House and Senate this year, making insight about how they work more vital than ever now.

According to Williams-Briles, forthrightness and a commitment to keeping a clear line of communication open with the public are the keys to forging trust between leaders and their community. Greene added that "when you're honest with the public, it alleviates issues...their imagination is way better than whatever you're really doing."

Williams-Briles encouraged anyone who has a question about the public access laws, or is afraid they may have unintentionally broken one, to contact the Public Access Counselor's office for advice about what to do in their specific circumstances. For more information on the Open Door Law, the APRA or the Public Access Counselor, visit the PAC website at www.in.gov/pac.