

The Daily Tar Heel

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Last week was Sunshine Week, a national initiative examining how open our governments are and how accessible public information really is. The Daily Tar Heel sent out six staff members in February to request public records without revealing their identities as reporters, testing officials' willingness to adhere to the law.

Local officials open to citizens' requests

Some agencies unable to provide electronic records

BY LINDSAY MICHEL
INVESTIGATIVE TEAM CO-EDITOR

While many UNC students basked in the sunlight along beaches all over the world last week, another kind of sunshine was shed across the U.S. in hopes of drawing public attention to the importance of open records laws.

Sunshine Week is a national initiative that aims to draw public discourse and attention to the importance of open government and freedom of information. This year it took place during the week of March 12.

To put North Carolina's public officials to the test, the N.C. Press Association teamed up with newsrooms and organizations across the state to conduct a public records audit.

Between Feb. 19 and Feb. 23, government agencies in 41 counties were approached by citizens requesting information from closed meeting minutes to public officials' e-mails — all of which are available according to the state's open records laws.

The Daily Tar Heel sent a team of reporters to loca-

tions around Orange County to request documents as average citizens. The auditors' identities as reporters were not revealed until after the audit was complete.

While most government agencies supplied the requested information, others said it couldn't be done.

Chapel Hill

Chapel Hill Town Council closed session minutes are a challenge to attain. They are unavailable for public review until released by the town attorney, said Sandy Kline, deputy town clerk.

"I normally don't have too many requests for closed session minutes," she said. "And if I do, I go to the town attorney to see if they can be released or not."

Council members usually discuss personnel issues or possible property acquisitions behind closed doors, she said. If they vote to take any real action, they must do so in open session.

But Town Hall does make records of town council members' e-mails easily accessible.

Files of e-mails for about the past month and a half are kept in binders on a table in the clerk's office for

SEE SUNSHINE, PAGE 8



DTH/JONATHAN SHRADER AND SEANN VICENTE

Audit finds cooperation, confusion over N.C. laws

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH — When it comes to records that detail the government's inner workings, N.C. officials often make such documents public without hesitation.

But those same officials are stumped equally as often by what the law says must be released and how to physically do it.

INSIDE

See a guide for obtaining records that are public by law.

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Many refused to release minutes of closed meetings or e-mails sent by elected officials, or made the process of obtaining such records difficult, according to emissaries sent to local government offices across the state by the N.C. Press Association, the League of Women Voters and the N.C. Open Government Coalition.

One auditor said she was repeatedly questioned about her identity, her job, her place of residence and why she wanted copies of town council members' e-mails. Under state law, a citizen doesn't have

to provide any of that information to inspect and copy such a public record.

"I felt like a citizen with no rights being badgered to get any public records," she wrote.

In a one-week period in February, auditors visited government offices with orders to ask for several public records, including minutes of closed meetings, legal bills from outside counsel, and e-mail correspondence of members of town councils and school boards. All are considered public record under N.C. law.

The results suggest better training is needed for the front-office staff of local government agencies, who often aren't familiar with the details of the

SEE N.C. AUDIT, PAGE 8

Preacher able to return, but not to Pit

BY GREG MARGOLIS
STAFF WRITER

Gary Birdsong, known to UNC students as the Pit Preacher, might be in need of a new nickname.

Birdsong received a letter Friday from Department of Public Safety officials stating that he is no longer allowed to preach in the Pit or on the ramps or steps leading into it.

The punishment comes as a result of a trespass warning Birdsong received March 8 after he refused to move from the Pit area.



Pit Preacher Gary Birdsong appealed his UNC ban and plans to preach Tuesday.

Birdsong said he filed an appeal that garnered the lighter sanction.

"I don't think it's right," said Birdsong, who has been preaching at UNC since the '80s and plans to preach outside of the Pit on Tuesday, weather permitting. "I try to stand my ground, but this right here is ridiculous."

Don Luse, director of the Carolina Union, said groups can reserve space in the Pit through the Office of Events Planning. The reservation entitles a group to use

the space as it sees fit and to control what goes on in the reserved area, he said.

Usually when there is a conflict, events planning officials try to mediate the dispute, Luse said.

"We explain the policy and say these people have reserved the Pit, ... you have to respect that right," he said. "We try to provide an alternative where they might be able to do what they want."

SEE PREACHER, PAGE 4

UNC uses perfect break to garner Sweet 16 berth

BY BRANDON STATON
SENIOR WRITER

WINSTON-SALEM — The turning point of No. 1 seed North Carolina's second round matchup against No. 9 Michigan State came before the second official timeout. After a MSU foul

on the floor, UNC sophomore Tyler Hansbrough checked back in without

the protective mask that he has worn since breaking his nose on March 4.

As the entry pass came toward him seconds later, Hansbrough looked so excited that he seemed to meet the ball halfway. Once he had the ball in hand, he turned and sank a 15-foot jumper from the baseline without hesitation and continued toward one of the finest performances of his career, leading UNC to an 81-67 win and

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DTH/LARRY BAUM

An unmasked Tyler Hansbrough takes it to the hole for two during UNC's second round 81-67 win Saturday against Michigan State.

Board moves to confront textbook prices

Policy validates student group's efforts

BY ERIC JOHNSON
SENIOR WRITER

GREENVILLE — The UNC system adopted a tougher stance on textbook costs Thursday, with much of the credit going to student leaders.

The decision by the system

Board of Governors to approve a comprehensive textbook policy marks a significant victory for the UNC-system Association of Student Governments.

Forcing the university to confront rising book costs has been one of the ASG's signature issues,

and system officials went out of their way to praise the association's recent efforts.

"This really came out of the work that Derek and his group did," said Ginger Burks, UNC-system associate vice president for finance.

She was singling out ASG President Derek Pantiel, who has used his seat on the board to high-

light student complaints about the rising cost of books.

Though textbook costs have been a part of the student agenda for years, Pantiel and his staff have pressed strongly during the past few months for a systemwide policy to require on-time adoption of new textbooks and a rental system

SEE BOG TEXTBOOKS, PAGE 4

announcement

FOLLOW THE MADNESS
Ready to throw out your NCAA Tournament brackets? Turn to pages 6 and 7 and start a new one with the winning teams to date already filled out for you.

online | dailytarheel.com

CALLING FOR SAFETY Durham starts a system to provide emergency alerts
GOING GREEN UNC residence halls' conservation competition to end this week
END OF THE RAINBOW Children look for pot of gold in St. Patrick's Day event

campus | page 5

BUILDING A BILLION
The University has started its efforts to raise \$1 billion in external research funding by 2015, an initiative announced in September.

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MEETING OF THE MINDS
The Carrboro Board of Aldermen meet to discuss the Martin Luther King Jr. park, and the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City School Board talks graduation.

this day in history

MARCH 19, 1995 ...
UNC basketball standout Michael Jordan plays his first game as No. 45 for the Chicago Bulls after a two-year break. He scores 19 points against the Indiana Pacers.

weather

Mostly sunny
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