Commentary

Illuminate our local laws

By Kristin Yarbrough
Published in the Blount Countian
Mar. 26, 2025
—

Ignorance of the law is no excuse: It's an idea that dates back to the Law of Moses, to Plato, to Rome. But what if those responsible for recording and enforcing the law are also unaware of the law? What if knowledge of the law is intentionally withheld?

These questions riddled my mind as I researched dogs-at-large laws for an article in last week's *Blount Countian.* Of our county's 14 municipalities, only Blountsville, Highland Lake, and Oneonta publish their laws online. The remaining 11 towns' ordinances live only

in the records of each town. These are our local laws, yet they are not available to view on town websites, nor at the County Courthouse's records room, not even at every town hall. All I could do is request all dog-related ordinances, and hope.

In some cases, town clerks quickly emailed a PDF. In other cases, multiple town officials had no idea what animal laws were in effect. I was sent one ordinance that, I later found out, had been replaced by a more recent law. Twice the voice on the other end of the call said that there was no such ordinance "to my knowledge" or "that I can remember," and left it at that. One official told me that the town's dog law, if there was one, was decades old and hadn't been updated because "you have to send them to an attorney and they're not cheap." But for now, it's still on the books, isn't it?

Most concerning was the Blount County town that refused to email an ordinance. My question of why the town wouldn't freely share its laws was answered summarily as "policy," and the phone never rang with the promised follow-up from the mayor. Only when I called again weeks later and mentioned that I was a journalist working with the sheriff's office was the ordinance provided. Ignorance of the law is no excuse, indeed, but is it really ignorance when requested information is withheld?

"If an ordinance is passed, the town should have a record of it," said Rob Johnston, director of legal services at Alabama League of Municipalities. State law does not require municipalities to post ordinances online and some don't have the resources to do so, Johnston added; in those cases it's just a matter of asking for the ordinance.

Every citizen of the state is entitled to review municipal laws and most other public documents under Alabama's Open Records Act. As to why this Blount County town refused access to its law, "It's a good question," Johnston said.

We could dismiss my concern as irrelevant: after all, if no one knows about a law, it might as well not exist, right? Not so. Knowledge of the law is necessary not only for those accused of violation, but also for residents who wish to see a law enforced for their own protection or quality of life. At some point a council and interested citizens had deemed a topic important enough to codify, and unless repealed, it remains in effect.

Without record of a law, how can authorities enforce that law? How can agents appropriately address calls? How can citations be issued or charges filed? In the case of the dog laws I was researching, even state law is affected by town ordinances, since applicability of Alabama's dogs-at-large statute is determined by the existence or absence of a specific local law.

When public information is lost or hidden, the result is confusion, inefficiencies, and increased costs across multiple county and municipal agencies. Public services are then

not fully available to the citizens whose tax dollars fund their existence.

Transparency is crucial for empowering residents to be informed and accountable. Blount County's elected and appointed officials have the opportunity to let the sun shine on our local governments. They can view a question as an annoyance or a meddling, or they can recognize a citizen taking initiative in his or her community. They can frown at public inquiry, or they can encourage awareness and involvement. May they choose the light.

Copyright © BlountAnimals.com