

**How DC’s Open Records and Open Meetings Laws Can Work for You**

Tax dollars pay for work done by the DC government, whether it is the police department charged with protecting public safety or public and charter schools working to educate your children and those of your friends and neighbors. Sometimes government officials forget whom they work for: It is you and other members of the public. And we often worry that our tax dollars are not being spent wisely. Open records and open meetings laws are designed to help us – the public – keep tabs on the actions of government officials and those with whom they do business.

**Case studies – Economic incentives and public disclosure**When Amazon was circling the Washington region to try to decide where to locate its second headquarters and promised tens of thousands of jobs, the DC government made a bid. But what was in that bid? And at what point should the public be briefed about the city’s offer of tax incentives and other concessions?

Yes, economic development officials around the country are often reluctant to make public their offers, arguing that this can weaken their negotiating position. But, at some point, the public has the right to know what is on the table and whether it is the best use of public funds, as well as tax breaks, from a government that may be struggling to fund other key services such as transportation, schools, and public safety.

As Martin Austermuhle, a reporter for WAMU radio put it: “To lure Amazon’s second headquarters to the District, city officials say they are willing to offer the company significant tax breaks” on property and earnings.

Amazon also proposed to build an “Amazon University," he said. “But many of the other incentives D.C. is putting on the line for HQ2 — including the actual dollar value to Amazon — remain a mystery, known only to senior city officials and executives with the Seattle-based company,” he added.
(<https://wamu.org/story/18/01/17/found-d-c-s-bid-amazon-hq2-didnt/>)

**Public education**The City Paper’s Rachel Cohen, who writes about charter schools, learned from an open records request that the DC Public School Charter Board was well aware of financial problems that the Washington Mathematics Science Technology Charter School was experiencing, months before acting to swiftly close the popular charter. As the City Paper story published on April 26, 2018 shows, the board didn’t intervene in the financially troubled school. (<https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/city-desk/article/21002438/the-dc-public-charter-school->)

**Police videos**

The Washington Post obtained videos of a police officer’s stop of City Council member Trayon White after filing a lawsuit challenging secrecy. ([bit.ly/35BTSFm](http://bit.ly/35BTSFm))

TAKE ACTION! You don’t have to be a journalist or a lawyer to get government records or attend meetings of the City Council or other government agencies.

**Here’s information on DC Open Records Act:**Go to <https://www.open-dc.gov/freedom-information-act>

**Here’s a sample of records that you can get by filing a public information request:**

* Police videos – though generally MPD will resist and you may need legal help.
* Police arrest records – the ACLU obtained data by race that showed disparities in who got arrested
* Consumer assistance — the “broken meter report,” for example, on that parking meter that would not take your money, but you were fined anyway
* City contracts with private companies
* Housing authority records
* Emails exchanged by City Council members and others about an issue that interests you. A citizens’ group got emails – after suing the city – to see whether there was improper dealing by a Council Member to favor a developer over the community.
* Details of secret court settlements. An ANC Commissioner succeeded in getting information about sexual assault settlements by DC government agencies
* Public health – DC Open Government Coalition board member Fritz Mulhauser filed complaints claiming that decisions by DC’s only public hospital, United Medical Center, illegally took place behind closed doors related to issues about its operations, which by law should have been discussed in public. Go to <https://dcogc.org/blog/d-c-health-decisions->
behind-closed-doors-what-are-the-united-medical-center-trustees-hiding/

**Here’s information on DC Open Meetings Act**Go to <https://www.open-dc.gov/open-meetings-act>

*The DC Open Government Coalition can help with your public information requests.*

<https://dcogc.org/>
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