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September 19, 2023

Jeanne McAndrew
Administrative Assistant
Weekapaug Fire District
4 Wawaloam Drive
Westerly, RI 02891

VIA EMAIL AND MAIL

Dear Ms. McAndrew:

In researching issues relating to fire districts in the state, we were astonished to discover that information on the Weekapaug Fire District's website is not readily accessible to the public. Instead, in order to obtain access to certain information that is apparently posted on the website, one must provide an email address or sign in via a Google or Facebook account.¹

Frankly, we have never before come across a government entity that hides information on its website from the general public, nor can we conceive of any lawful basis for doing so.² It is directly contrary to the goals of transparency and accountability that should be at the forefront of any government entity's activities, even one as narrowly focused as a fire district.

In accordance with the requirements of the Access to Public Records Act, the website provides access to information about its procedures for the public to obtain records. But under that law, the fire district would need to provide, if requested, a copy of all the information that is currently hidden from view, so it is unclear to us what purpose this secrecy serves.

While community information about a small fire district in the state is unlikely to draw much website viewing, it clearly is public and should therefore be readily accessible. Further, just as the open records law protects the anonymity of individuals by allowing them to make requests without providing their name, there should be no obligation on a

¹ Ironically, unlike closed-off community and calendar information, the website does allow unimpeded access to information about the yacht and tennis clubs in the district.

² Not having provided an email address, we do not know whether one automatically obtains access to the closed-off portions of the website after providing that information or whether the Fire District exercises discretion in whom it allows in once that information is provided. Either way, it is problematic.

person to provide their email address in order to gain access to information on a governmental website.

We therefore request that the Fire District take prompt steps to open up its website to all without the need to register or submit an email address or sign in through a third-party site. Obviously, if the District has any confidential information that it does not feel the public is entitled to access, it need not post it on the website in the first place.

Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this matter, and I look forward to hearing back from you about this.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Brown". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Steven Brown
Executive Director