

Councilmember Art Shad pledged to start posting his e-mails immediately. But he's concerned that technology may soon make for unreasonable demands for public access, like webcams at desks of elected officials.



FILE PHOTO/WALTER COKER

## Out of Tech

### CITY E-MAIL POLICIES DON'T ALWAYS JIBE WITH DEMANDS FOR OPEN GOVERNMENT

Duval County is the most open and accountable government in the state, according to a study released recently by the Chicago-based conservative watchdog group Sam Adams Alliance. Despite that honor, most Jacksonville lawmakers still don't make their e-mails accessible online. And the e-mails that *are* made public — at least those posted online by the mayor's senior staff — seem suspiciously few in number and devoid of content.

This latter fact has been noted, commented upon and groused about by journalists and city watchdogs, who marvel at the lack of interoffice e-mails. Surely Mayor Peyton exchanges e-mails with Chief of Staff Adam Hollingsworth and Chief Administrative Officer Alan Mosley? Not according to the electronic evidence. Although all three men receive e-mails from citizens and some City Councilmembers, they almost never e-mail one another. And when they do, the missives are only about inconsequential things.

Some cynics find that implausible, and suggest the mayor's top staff are using an alternate form of electronic communication, like personal e-mail accounts. But the mayor's Director of Communications Misty Skipper says the paucity of interdepartmental e-mail doesn't mean anyone's hiding mail. She says top officials simply don't use the technology.

"We don't do the majority of our dialogue via e-mail," she says. "Our offices are all close together. It's much more effective to get up and walk next door. We believe face-to-face communication is much more effective, efficient and quicker." She adds, "There are no second e-mail accounts."

The absence of City Council e-mails online is a rather different matter. Last year, the city's Information Technology Department added the capability for all City Councilmembers to post their

e-mails for public review — all it takes is a call to the IT folks. Since the documents are public record anyway, the online posting is merely a matter of improving access. And it was part of a city effort to make government more transparent after a scathing Times-Union investigation found routine violations of state Sunshine Law. But today, only seven of the City Council's 19 members post their e-mails: Daniel Davis, Ronnie Fussell, Richard Clark, Jack Webb, Kevin Hyde, Glorious Johnson and Johnny Gaffney.

When asked why their e-mails weren't public, most of the other councilmembers reached by Folio Weekly said they hadn't given the matter much thought. Some believed their e-mails were already posted. "My intent is to be on there," says Councilmember Warren Jones.

Councilmember John Crescimbeni says the same, and promises he'll talk to IT after council returns from its break. However, he wants e-mails posted only after he reads them. Councilmember Reginald Brown's assistant Daphne Colbert said that Brown has discussed posting e-mails and will make a decision in the next couple of months. Councilmember Clay Yarborough hadn't given the matter much thought because they're already publicly available, albeit not online. "Maybe I'll give that more thought," he promises. "More public interest and easier access is good for constituents." (Folio Weekly could not reach Councilmembers Don Redman, Ray Holt, Art Graham, Michael Corrigan or Stephen Joost before deadline.)

Councilmembers Denise Lee and Bill Bishop objected to posting e-mails online, however. Lee says she had other priorities and anyone who wanted to read her e-mails or any other public records needed only to ask. "I've got so many other issues in my district, e-mails aren't a priority," says Lee.

For Bishop, it's a privacy issue. Even though anyone can make a public records request to review e-mails, he fears public posting would hamper communication with his constituents. "I just don't think it is helping the cause of democracy if people with nothing better to do are reading all my e-mails," he says. "If you want to ask for them, I'll give them to you."

Only Councilmember Art Shad made a commitment to call IT and join the other online posters pronto. But Shad admits he's troubled by the access future technology will make possible. "Even today, we have the ability to put an audiovisual camera on every city councilmember's desk," he says. "Maybe in the future, you'd be able to pull up phone conversations and post them live on the Internet."

In fact, the Sunshine Manual — the state's handbook on open government — does say that anything made or received in the transaction of official business is itself a public record. Why not a conversation with a constituent or making a phone call?

"You laugh," says Shad, "but I can foresee The Florida Times-Union deciding it wants a webcam." □

*To access council e-mails, go to [coj.net](http://coj.net), click on "City Council" on the top banner, then click on "View City Council e-mails." Instructions and a password to log on will pop up. Once on the page, click on the folder marked "City Council Public E-mail" for the folders of individual councilmembers. To access the e-mail of the mayor and his staff, go to same sign-in*