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**What is the subject/title of the entry?** An open community needs an open government:  
Editorials urging transparency in local government

**Date(s) of publication?** 6/2/2017, 6/9/2017, 7/14/2017, 9/19/2017, 5/12/2017

**Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation?** UNDER

**Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)**

These five editorials changed the culture of a local city government, and city council, that was insular, closed, and arrogant. As a result of Gerritt's relentless pressure, public officials in Palestine, Texas, became more responsive to media requests. The city's media policy changed to enable reporters to talk directly to department heads, instead of having to get everything through Public Information Officer Nate Smith.

Until Gerritt became editor of the Palestine Herald-Press in May of 2017, elected officials in Palestine and Anderson County operated largely without scrutiny. They were used to having their own way with the local press. Up until 18 months ago, former City Manager Michael Alexander actually read and edited newspaper stories on city government before they were published. Anderson County Sheriff Greg Taylor, an imposing figure, silenced reporters and editors by bullying and intimidating them.

That changed after Gerritt, who spent 17 years at the Detroit Free Press, took charge. Two weeks after starting, he took Sheriff Taylor to task for refusing to provide information about a prisoner's death and closing his jail to the public. He also told city officials they had no right to interfere with independent reporting.

Public officials knew things had changed. They were stunned and angry: The local newspaper was holding them accountable to the citizens they serve.

After Gerritt's first editorial, "Shedding light on death," Sheriff Taylor imposed an information embargo on the Herald-Press. He cancelled his subscription in an angry letter to the editor, refused to allow Gerritt in the jail, and harangued him for nearly an hour at a meeting called at Gerritt's request. None of that stopped the paper from doing its job, which contributed to a federal investigation of the Sheriff's Office.

City officials reacted similarly, but gradually opened up, following public pressure sparked by Gerritt's editorials. The city stopped making reporters submit freedom-of-information requests for routine reports. Gerritt's editorials gave local public officials, and our readers, a civics lesson on how the press should operate in a democratic society.

Jake Mienk,  
Publisher











