Sunshine on New Orleans government entities: An editorial

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By Editorial page staff, The Times-Picayune

New Orleans municipal government isn't limited to the departments and agencies that everyone has heard of, in fact, some of the more than 150 boards, commissions and other public entities at work in the city are downright obscure. But even panels that aren't household names do important jobs and spend public money.

That makes them worth watching, and that's the point of a new website created by two Tulane University professors.

David Marcello, executive director of the Public Law Center at Tulane Law School, and Aaron Schneider, who holds an endowed political science professorship, wanted to make it easier for the public to keep an eye on what they describe as satellite government.

The New Orleans Satellite Government site, at nolasatellitegovernment.tulane.edu, provides extensive information on 152 entities. Those included had to meet several criteria: They were created by state or local laws, spend a significant amount of public money, depend on government agents or appointees for some members of their boards and are regulated by public rules.

Satellite government can help achieve public goals, the website notes, pointing to positives such as greater technical expertise and a more diverse group of those who serve the public. But there's a downside "if they lack transparency or obscure the lines of accountability," the website says.

Visitors to the website can search by 26 categories or by the name of an entity. They can also search the names of board members, which number more than 700. The site's users can gather a significant amount of information about these government agencies and panels, from why and how they were created to who
serves on them and how they are appointed.

Compiling the information and creating the site took a year and a half and cost $12,000, money that was provided by the office of Tulane Provost Michael Bernstein and Tulane's Murphy Institute.

But the creators say that they want to update it continually and are looking for suggestions for expanding the information provided.

"This is another effort to bring sunshine, transparency and accountability to government," Mr. Marcello said.

That's a worthy objective, and this site should help those interested in scrutinizing city government, whether they are academics, journalists, civic organizations, public officials or the general public.

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