

Small Town Sunshine Law Battles Share a Common Law Firm

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Belle Alderwoman Rebecca Withouse stands outside after a monthly Board of Aldermen meeting July 14 at the Lonnie Feeler Memorial Building in Belle, Mo. Since Lauber Municipal Law started contracting with Belle, Withouse said the once free cost of receiving public records has risen greatly. Withouse has been working to accommodate more city visibility for the public by trying to enforce open records laws. | Mallory Pool/Missourian

In a small town where everyone knows everyone, it's hard to keep secrets.

So when local governments hide their business, it can be especially galling to the residents they represent, and faith in local governance begins to plummet.

And when transparency and accountability are absent, it's easier for drama and intrigue to take over.

Take Belle, where a city alderman says her fellow leaders have done all they can to prevent her from communicating with the public.

Or Vienna, where a former sheriff was accused of some serious misdeeds, but it took a judge's ruling for city leaders to hand over documents detailing those allegations.

Or Sedalia, where citizen complaints about openness in government have been centered around the nearly \$2 million paid to a private law firm advising city leaders.

The thread tying all of these local governments together: they all contract with Lauber Municipal Law.

The firm deploys attorneys to 174 cities in Missouri and nine in Kansas. These lawyers act as city attorneys, prosecutors, counsel — whatever legal services the city needs. Nathan Nickolaus, an attorney at the firm, said it is the singular law firm in the state only practicing municipal law.

When cities struggle to navigate public records and open meetings requirements, their attorneys — experts in municipal law — are there to step in.

Outsourcing these roles is not uncommon. Some cities hire full-time staff members to serve as their city attorneys and prosecutors. Others, mostly smaller and more rural who typically pay them less than they would a full-time staff, contract with firms like Lauber Municipal Law to support the city only when needed. The firm's central Missouri office charges a standard rate of \$205 per hour.

One of the roles filled by a city attorney is making sure the city follows Missouri's Sunshine Law, which commits the state to openness in government and outlines transparency requirements for public agencies.

The Missouri Sunshine Law dictates the regulations around open meetings, actions of elected officials and public records.

Nickolaus said smaller towns are "cut off" from any sort of education, and it is more difficult to train city staff on the Sunshine Law.

That is where the firm steps in.

"Our bread and butter is these rural cities," Nickolaus said.

Some cities rely on the firm's attorneys more than others. Nickolaus said it depends on how much the city leaders feel capable of doing on their own.

"Here in the central Missouri office, we're kind of saturated with clients," he said. "They keep coming because they don't have anywhere else to go."

One expert in the Sunshine Law praised the role the firm is playing in small Missouri towns and noted that a city attorney has the delicate role of balancing the public's interest in information with the city's right to some degree of privacy.

In some cities that brought in the firm, there were already documented problems with transparency, and in many cases, those had led to the kind of drama and dysfunction that small towns can specialize in.

But critics say that rather than fix the situations, the law firm has steered those cities further away from transparency.

“The Sunshine Law is just a way to get documents,” Nickolaus said. “It’s nothing more, but people think that it’s a way that the government has to explain itself.”

He said one of the benefits of being an outside attorney is that he doesn’t get caught up in the drama.

“My client is the city as a corporate entity,” Nickolaus said. “... I don’t work for the citizens.”

‘It rots from the head’

Rebecca Withouse, one of four people sitting on the Board of Aldermen in Belle, never wanted to run for public office. She said a lack of transparency in city government left her with no other choice.

“Everybody's scared to get involved in our town because we're all related. It's a small town. Everybody's family,” she said, adding that she left Belle but moved back about a decade ago. “I am not. I'm a black sheep.”

Before she decided to run, Withouse started regularly attending board meetings to watch the mayor and aldermen. She saw them committing the same Sunshine Law violations over and over again.

“It just made me so angry because they just didn't care,” she said.

In June 2024, then-Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey settled a lawsuit against the city for failure to abide by the Sunshine Law.

As part of the settlement, the city admitted to:

- Failing to provide public notices of Board of Aldermen meetings
- Discussing public business not listed on meeting agendas
- Failing to maintain public meeting minutes
- Holding closed sessions during public meetings without announcing a specific reason authorized by law
- Failing to record the reason for closing a public meeting in the minutes
- “The City exhibited a conscious design, intent, or plan to violate the Open Meetings Law,” according to the attorney general’s petition, which names former Mayor Daryl White, Jr. and the board.

The city was required to pay a \$500 fine, and certain city staff and officials had to attend a Sunshine Law training.

“As a result of the City’s failure to comply with the law’s most basic requirements, Belle residents have been deprived of the opportunity to attend public meetings and be apprised in advance of items the Board discusses,” according to the petition.

At about the same time, Withouse decided to run.

Now, she has found herself in an ongoing battle for city transparency that has turned her life upside down.

“I’ve been threatened, I’ve had trash thrown in my yard, my children are yelled at,” Withouse said.

She said she fears for her safety.



Belle City Attorney James Klahr, front left, and Alderwoman Rebecca Withouse, back right, look at meeting papers at a monthly Board of Alderman meeting July 14 at the Lonnie Feeler Memorial Building in Belle, Mo. Klahr sits in on all monthly meetings to ensure legal procedures are followed or to answer any questions from the board or residents. The city of Belle hired Lauber Municipal Law in December 2023. | Mallory Pool/Missourian

“I have been walking into a store and have people spit on the ground in front of me,” Withouse said. “... I had a citizen come up and yell so much in my face and so close to me that he spit on my face in front of my daughter.”

Her ongoing battle with the city has also been tough on her private life.

“I've cried over this ...” she said. “I am sticking to this because it’s rotten ... it rots from the head.”

Lauber Municipal Law, which was hired in December 2023, has been a key player from the beginning of her tenure.

Nickolaus said when the firm arrived in Belle, city staff had little understanding of the Sunshine Law. He said the firm started enforcing open records rules.

“What we try to do in this situation is just to create a sense of order,” he said. “... What we try to do is create structure.”

Withouse said she doesn’t think the firm’s attorney, previously Todd Smith, has always given the city the correct advice.



In her time as an alderman, she said the mayor has not given her agendas until moments before the meetings start, has inappropriately closed public meetings and has not complied with records requests.

“We've asked for (the meeting packet) to be emailed to us. I've even said I would come down and get it. But, normally, I show up and there's a packet sitting there and I don't have any chance to review it,” she said.

Belle Mayor James “Pudd” Mitchell said the meeting agendas and documents are often not complete until Monday. Regarding closed meetings, Mitchell pointed to the city attorney.

Belle Mayor James Mitchell walks outside after the conclusion of a monthly Board of Aldermen meeting on

“I don't know how we broke the Sunshine Law on going into closed sessions because our lawyer is here every meeting,” Mitchell said. “This kind of stuff right here is why our lawyer attends every meeting.”

He takes issue with Withouse's characterization of the way the city operates.

“We've been accused of everything, and we don't hide nothing,” Mitchell said, adding that the city relies so heavily on the firm because of its past Missouri Sunshine violations.

To try to provide the public with more transparency about discussion items, Withouse would go to city hall, take a picture of the agenda and post it on her Facebook page.

Then, every second Tuesday of the month, she livestreams the board meetings from her Facebook account.

Originally, she tried to livestream the meetings using her laptop so she could search Missouri's Sunshine Law on her phone at the same time, but she said city officials refused to give her the Wi-Fi password.

Her solution: she bought a second phone.

“If I want to broadcast on Facebook, but then I also want to be Googling statutes and things like that, I have to have the second phone,” Withouse said.

Mitchell said she never asked him for the Wi-Fi password.

Mitchell said the city used to livestream all meetings, but it stopped because it became too time consuming, often stretching the meetings longer than needed to account for connection issues.

Withouse also said Belle's residents can't always afford to access records that are supposed to be public.

“We've always been a poor town. We are a transient town,” she said. “We don't have a lot of industry to support our town.”



The town of Belle's Board of Aldermen and the Belle mayor listen to a resident at a monthly Board of Aldermen meeting on July 14 at the Lonnie Feeler Memorial Building in Belle, Mo. Withouse said she makes it a point to be friendly to the aldermen and city officials who disagree with her. "It makes me very happy to know that they get very unhappy to see me," Withouse said. "I know they have been checking and waving, and I make it a point to wave, be super friendly." | Mallory Pool/Missourian

Since the arrival of Lauber Municipal Law, she said, the cost of receiving public records has skyrocketed.

She said records that used to be free are now billed at the city's hourly rates. While cities are allowed to charge for the time spent gathering documents, it is optional, and the higher the cost, the further out of reach records can become from many in the community.

Nickolaus said the cost of records in Belle is based on city staff's hourly rates, reflecting the local cost of living.

City Treasurer and Office Manager Charro Reasor said if the city receives a records request that isn't "something simple," staff typically send the request to the city attorney for advice.

Since the firm started working with Belle, the city's budget for attorney fees has more than quadrupled.

In April, the Belle Board of Aldermen passed a “Censure of Alderperson,” which was presented to Withouse.

The resolution stated Withouse shall not knowingly blindside public officials, criticize any staff members or speak to the public on behalf of the city. For that reason, Withouse told the Missourian that she is speaking as a resident and not an elected official, stressing that she is speaking to her own opinion, not that of the rest of the board.

Mitchell said the censure was to “reprimand” Withouse for her conduct.

Nickolaus, who assisted the city with writing the resolution, said it has no legal consequences. It reflects the majority of the board’s feelings about Withouse, but is a low-level form of discipline.

He said the resolution prohibits Withouse from making promises on behalf of the entire board.

During the same board meeting, the mayor also informed her that if she continues to livestream the meetings, she must do so from the audience.

“(Withouse) would set the tripod up in front of her, but it’s always pointed the opposite direction,” Mitchell said “Now, how is that fair?”

Withouse turned her life upside down, and she isn’t shying away any time soon. Change has been hard to come by, though — she said her calls for reform have spurred other city leaders to “close the ranks even more.”

But she hopes she has got it all wrong.

“If I’m wrong, then I’m wrong,” she said in October. “I’ll be the first person to go, ‘Thank God, it’s not as bad as I fear’ ... I would love to look like a big old idiot at the end of the day and slink away with my tail between my legs.”

Court battle

In Vienna, just a town over from Withouse’s fight for transparency, former Maries County Sheriff Chris Heitman found himself in the middle of his own struggle — and a related lawsuit.

Vienna has contracted with Lauber Municipal Law since June 2024 and often shares attorneys with Belle.

He said the city of Belle has committed dozens of Sunshine Law violations, reiterating Withouse’s grievances.

“That girl’s trying to do right,” Heitman said. “She’s almost bullied up there, and all she wants to do is be transparent.”

He said Belle and Vienna city officials’ attitudes about transparency have shifted since hiring Lauber Municipal Law.

“They hide behind the Sunshine Law, which is wrong,” Heitman said. “... It’s not how government should be.”

Though Heitman said the firm’s attorneys didn’t start the cycle of transparency issues in Belle and Vienna, they have continued to happen during the firm’s oversight.

“The law firm is just not putting them in check,” he said.

Heitman has had his own battles with the city.

He filed a Sunshine request to the Vienna Police Department for police reports about himself after city officials accused him of numerous criminal acts varying from “financial misconduct to civil rights violations, arson to insurance fraud” in early 2024, according to court documents.

Heitman said Vienna Police Chief Shannon Thompson sent the documents to a public Facebook group his wife runs and posted there publicly.

The city acknowledged receipt of Heitman’s records request, and told him it would take 14 to 21 business days, according to court documents. The city further delayed the release of the records, and later notified Heitman that he would receive them by May 1.

Vienna Mayor Timothy Schell said the city receives Sunshine requests often, and it always notifies the city attorney after every request.

“We try to be in compliance with all Sunshine requests,” Schell said. “We are not hiding anything.”

But instead of providing the records, the city sued Heitman on May 2.

Nickolaus said he was unsure whether the documents were public, as he said it was unclear whether Heitman requested them in his official capacity as sheriff or as a private citizen.

There was an active investigation into Heitman, the city claimed, noting that the records contain allegations of criminal misconduct on part of the sheriff and other deputies.

“Investigative reports are closed until the investigation becomes inactive,” the city’s petition said.

Nickolaus said that when cities are unsure of how to rule on a records request, one option is to bring the matter to the judge. He said this was the intent of the city's lawsuit against Heitman.

"To say that it was a suit against him is a bit of expansionism," he said.

Schell said the city was prompted to start contracting with Lauber Municipal Law when the issues with Heitman arose. He said they chose the firm because it gave the city the lowest bid for legal services, and that Vienna puts out a bid annually.

The litigation went to trial and after a monthslong court battle, Heitman prevailed — the records were deemed public by a judge.

Before Heitman received any records, he said the city's attorney sent the documents to the media. Nickolaus said that was not the case.

Bringing the matter to court didn't work the way Nickolaus intended. He said the "obscure process" is one that many judges are unfamiliar with.

Nickolaus said the judge agreed the records would typically be closed, but should be open in the interest of the public in this specific case. He also said that if he had to do it over again, he wouldn't have taken the matter to a judge.

"I overestimated the court's ability to deal with that," Nickolaus said. "... I probably was being just a bit too clever, and it ended up costing my client a lot of money."

The Missourian could find no evidence that Heitman was ever charged with a crime, and Heitman said all the allegations were found to be false.

"I would be in prison if any of that was true," Heitman said, adding that his tarnished reputation has affected his ability to get jobs after deciding not to run for reelection.

The damage has already been done.

"My daughter was super embarrassed," Heitman said, adding that she was 16 at the time.

Heitman said small towns are always full of "quirks" and unchecked power, but that things have gone too far in Maries County.

"You get the ego everywhere," he said. "But then you continually make these obvious illegal actions or wrong actions, that's when there's a real problem."

Schell declined to comment on Heitman's case specifically, due to Heitman's ongoing appeal of the case to cover attorney fees.

When asked who initiated the city's suit against Heitman, Schell deferred to Thompson.

Thompson also declined to comment due to ongoing litigation, and deferred to Lauber Municipal Law.

‘Eroded the trust and faith’

Residents in Ashland, a city of 5,000 situated between Columbia and Jefferson City, have experienced two extremes on the spectrum of local government transparency.

Ashland has contracted with Lauber Municipal Law since 2021, and last year, the city spent over \$50,000 on the firm’s legal services. But a series of inconsistent practices has unfolded in the time since.

In one instance, Ashland’s contracted city attorney acted swiftly when responding to a suspected Sunshine Law violation. But just months later, an attorney from the same firm allowed city officials to hold private discussions on the floor of a public meeting.



Kent Dunwiddie stands in front of his home in Ashland on Aug. 7. Dunwiddie previously served on the Ashland Board of Alderman. | Molly Fox/Boone County Journal

In early October, Kent Dunwiddie walked into Ashland City Hall for one of the city’s biweekly Board of Aldermen meetings.

Having lived in Ashland for the majority of his life, Dunwiddie's fellow Ward 1 residents elected him to the board in April 2025.

Instead of business as usual though, Dunwiddie said he was pulled into an office by Ashland's then-acting city attorney, Todd Smith, who he said read him his Miranda rights.

Nickolaus said it was not his Miranda rights, but rather his Garrity rights, which warn public employees that anything they say during investigations by their government employers can be used against them in a criminal case. He said Miranda and Garrity rights often sound similar.

Dunwiddie was accused of organizing a gathering of aldermen at a local pub to discuss then-City Administrator Kyle Michel's contract.

Dunwiddie said Smith presented him with a letter of grievances where Michel accused a majority of aldermen of meeting without notice and conspiring to void Michel's contract.

In the letter, Michel accused the board of violating the Missouri Sunshine Law by meeting privately without notice and conducting city business through off-site meetings.

"These actions have eroded the trust and faith I have in the elected body and have created an untenable work environment ..." Michel said in the letter. " Beyond the immediate impact, I am deeply concerned about broader public perception and reputational harm."

If a majority of the board had met that night to discuss Michel's contract, it would have been in violation of Missouri Sunshine Law.

But Dunwiddie said it never happened.

Dunwiddie remembers making plans with two other aldermen to grab drinks one night — a conversation he believes Smith overheard and brought to the attention of Mayor Dorise Slinker. Slinker then brought the issue to Michel, Dunwiddie suspects.

"The mayor and the city attorney — those two started this whole thing," Dunwiddie said.

He said being identified as the "ring leader" of an illegal quorum put a "target on (his) back." In early January, he told Slinker he planned to resign.

On Jan. 6, he received an apology from Michel, which he believes was Slinker's last ditch effort to convince him to finish the rest of his term.

"I extend my apology for any misunderstanding or turmoil that may have resulted from that portion of my grievance," Michel said in the letter.

Nickolaus said Smith advised Michel to write the apology after conducting an investigation.

Dunwiddie resigned later that day.

“Those two should have been forced to shake hands and make up,” Nickolaus said.

Dunwiddie traced many of the city's issues to its contract with Lauber Municipal Law.

“The outrageously false allegations filed against me by the City Administrator based on hearsay, rumors or misinformation given to him by (Slinker) and the City Attorney have created this situation,” Dunwiddie said in his resignation email. “The lack of any investigation into these allegations further enhances the animosity that already exists.”

When asked about an investigation into whether the aldermen met that night, Michel deferred to the firm.

Michel recently resigned after four years on the job. His final day as Ashland city administrator was May 22.

Slinker and Michel declined to comment on Dunwiddie’s resignation on the grounds that speaking about it would require discussing private personnel issues, an exemption to the Sunshine Law.

Dunwiddie said that while he was targeted for an open-meetings violation, the city has been moving toward more secrecy.

Since the city began contracting with Lauber Municipal Law, he said a closed session has been scheduled at the end of nearly all board meetings in case aldermen decided to use it.

“They want to keep everything hush-hush,” he said.

Michel said the city does not move into closed session at the end of every meeting, but it often has items to discuss in closed session.

He said he reaches out to the city attorney ahead of the meetings to ask if there are items to discuss in closed session, but “sometimes (the city attorney) is not getting back to us in a timely manner,” so the city adds a session just in case.

On Jan. 21, Gov. Mike Kehoe appointed Smith as the associate circuit judge to the 24th Judicial Circuit in St. Francois County, ending his time with both Lauber Municipal Law and Ashland.

Smith could not be reached for comment.

Holding a 'hearing'

With Smith gone, a new attorney from the firm stepped in to fill the void: Nickolaus.

A few months later, on March 17, lawyers conducted a trial-like hearing in Ashland City Hall to determine the future of a hemp store and cannabis lounge in Ashland.

The Board of Aldermen was tasked with determining whether to revoke the business license of Mary Jane's Place. The hearing was held on the grounds of alleged "illegal sale of controlled substances," according to a letter from the city to Mary Jane's Place.



People attend the hearing for Mary Jane's Place on March 17 at Ashland City Hall. More than 60 supporters of Mary Jane's showed up to the hearing, and more were turned away to comply with the fire code. | Amaya Morgan/Boone County Journal

The board heard nearly five hours of testimony and attorney statements from both Nickolaus and Gregrey Pfeiffer, the attorney representing Mary Jane's Place.

The hearing operated much like a judicial case with attorneys and witnesses.

Michel said the firm advised the city to hold a "semi-judicial hearing," and Nickolaus provided a script to Slinker and helped organize the administrative hearing.

"If they had taken away his business license, he would have been out of business, and he would have lost everything," Nickolaus said. "So he gets a hearing."

After outbursts from those in attendance, Slinker threatened to remove people from the room, though the meeting was public.

At various points throughout the hearing, Slinker would call a recess, and the board would take a break from hearing testimony.

During the breaks, members of the board were often seen talking in small groups, sometimes whispering in huddles on the floor. Members of the public could not hear the ongoing conversation, but the board never moved into a closed session.

Nickolaus said that if the board was discussing the hearing, it could have been a violation of the Sunshine Law, but ultimately, he doesn't know.

"I don't know what they were discussing," he said. "I wasn't a part of any of that."

At the end of the hearing, the board voted unanimously to take no action on revoking the license. When asked why the aldermen did not hold a public discussion before coming to a verdict, Slinker said, "it was a very long night." He said board members were not discussing the hearing during recesses.

Nickolaus was present for the entire hearing, though he never intervened.

A growing financial burden

Perhaps the change drawing the most attention to the firm's presence is the increase in legal fees these small cities, and their equally small budgets, are paying.

Jean Maneke, a Kansas City-based attorney, has seen these issues from both sides. She specializes in media and First Amendment law, formerly serving as counsel to the Missouri Press Association, and has assisted in writing provisions of Missouri's Sunshine Law. At the same time, Maneke's private firm has contracted with municipalities, meaning she has essentially acted as a city attorney for several entities in rural Missouri.

While firms based in larger cities, such as Lauber Municipal Law, are often priced higher, Maneke said cities pay for expertise that attorneys in rural areas might not have much experience in.

"You're weighing the cost of calling your attorney with the budget that you've got to live within, and that makes it very difficult for smaller towns that have smaller budgets," she said.

For the 2023-24 fiscal year, Belle budgeted \$3,288 on legal fees. For the month of February 2024 alone, one of its first months contracting with the firm, it paid \$2,881 in legal fees.

Throughout 2024, the monthly invoices the firm billed Belle often amounted to close to the city's budget for that entire fiscal year of legal fees.

The following fiscal year, the city increased its budget for legal fees to \$15,000. This fiscal year, the budget for legal fees is \$18,500.

The city is billed any time the firm's attorneys answer emails, attend board meetings or advise the city in any capacity. For example, in February 2024, it paid Lauber Municipal Law \$78 to have a 25-minute conversation with a reporter regarding a Sunshine Law request.

Mitchell recognizes the increase in spending on legal fees, but said it is necessary to have the firm's help protecting Belle from future Sunshine Law violations.

"Am I concerned about the money we spend? Absolutely. It's money that could be spent somewhere else," he said. "But whenever you constantly gotta watch over your back because you don't know which direction that knife's coming from, you gotta have the support of somebody with the knowledge of it more so than we do."

Maneke noted that there are several resources geared toward helping both municipal attorneys and city leaders in their understanding of Sunshine Law. Being well-versed in this area could eliminate some of the money cities must spend seeking advice from law firms.

"Every time you pick up the phone, you've got to remember that you're liable to be increasing the amount of money you're spending for an attorney," she said, adding that most municipalities aren't able to afford a city attorney.

The same increases can be seen in Vienna.

From July 2024 to June 2025, Vienna's first full fiscal year contracting with the firm, the city spent just shy of \$20,000 on legal fees. In the first seven months of the following fiscal year, the city spent \$16,500 in billed hours.

While cities' legal fees have increased under Lauber Municipal Law contracts, none compare to the city of Sedalia.

Between April 2021 and February 2026, Sedalia paid the firm just shy of \$2 million, according to over 1,000 invoice totals spanning that timeline obtained by the Missouriian, equating to nearly one invoice per business day.

The city, which has a population of a little over 20,000 people, has been spending between \$340,000 and just under \$500,000 a year in fees to Lauber Municipal Law.

Nickolaus said the high cost is partially because of an influx of Sunshine Law requests, adding that the number of records requests small towns are receiving is steadily increasing in general. He said many cities are not fully equipped to handle the requests, which is when they turn to their city attorney.

Out of Sedalia's \$35 million budget for fiscal year 2026, the city budgeted \$500,000 for legal fees.

Sedalia residents are alarmed, and are taking their concerns to social media.

"There is no reason that a single law firm should have its hands in this many communities," one user commented on a post listing the cities Lauber Municipal Law is active in.

Another user wrote: "Its time to elect people whose soul mission is to vote to get rid of lauber law firm and return to a city lawyer. We need someone who is from here" (sic).

There are entire Facebook groups devoted to monitoring Sedalia's city government, with many complaints and questions revolving around the firm's influence.

Sedalia City Administrator Matthew Wirt declined to comment on behalf of the city.

"It's easy to make us the bad guys and the boogeymen," Nickolaus said. "We are just doing what our clients are asking us to do."

Spanning the state

Scenes similar to the ones of Belle, Vienna and Ashland are playing out in cities across the state. The firm's sprawling reach is posing issues for swaths of rural Missouri, but its attorneys are finding success, and the firm's influence is only increasing.

The firm's presence also caused turmoil and tested loyalties in Fair Grove — another small city near Springfield. In May 2025, Fair Grove's mayor at the time, Thomas Voorhis, resigned after the Board of Alderman voted to terminate the city's contract with Lauber Municipal Law. Voorhis said his departure was directly linked to the dismissal of Fair Grove's then-acting city attorney.

According to reporting from the Springfield News-Leader, conflict began brewing when Fair Grove's board raised concerns about the city exceeding the amount it had budgeted for legal services. One alderman claimed the firm's attorney had not provided truthful information and guidance to city leadership.

Residents are also publicly directing blame toward the firm in the city of Odessa over a utilities bill-related saga.

The city announced in a March 27 Facebook post that utility charges had been miscalculated, and customers were overcharged during a six-year span. To receive a refund in the form of credit, they were required to sign a statement written by the Lauber Municipal Law city attorney, which included a waiver of future claims.

Calls for a state audit and other disciplinary action are circling Facebook chatter.

“If we the citizens are wrong for questioning what is going on and has gone on within City Hall it will all be explained for both sides from an outside source. Not by an attorney hired and paid for from the City,” one user commented.

Nickolaus said attorneys are cautious, and the waiver is standard.

Joseph Lauber, the firm’s managing member, deferred all comments to Nickolaus, who he referred to as an expert on Missouri Sunshine Law.

Nickolaus said there is often not extensive training around the Sunshine Law for city officials or attorneys across the state. He said it is usually not even taught in law schools.

To provide more training for attorneys, he wrote a book about Sunshine Law for the Missouri Bar Association, and he said a key role of his job is educating elected officials.

Maneke agreed on the importance of helping train city leaders to deal with some of these issues themselves — something not many attorneys in Missouri are equipped to do.

“Perhaps for a lot of rural attorneys, Sunshine Law doesn't seem like something you need very much, but it really is for an attorney representing a public governmental body,” Maneke said.

Nickolaus said quality municipal attorneys are hard to come by because of the magnitude of laws that are unique to local government.

“We’ve been able to provide that to (cities) at a very affordable price,” he said.