



Missouri House moves to strengthen open records law

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The Associated Press

Published April 17, 2018

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — The Missouri House gave initial approval Tuesday to a bill that would beef up the state's open records law.

The proposal would essentially give the attorney general's office subpoena power when investigating open records violations. Attorney General Josh Hawley has publicly supported the bill, and previously said his inability to subpoena witnesses tied his hands earlier this year when investigating Gov. Eric Greitens' office use of a message-destroying app.

"Transparency in our government is a vital part of our democracy," Hawley said in a statement last month, "and my Office must have the necessary tools to ensure that those who attempt to thwart records-retention and Sunshine policies can be thoroughly investigated."

While Missouri has strict laws mandating that a government's actions and records be available to the public, typically the only way to hold violators accountable is to take them to court. Even then, a guilty agency might not be penalized.

If the bill becomes law, people or agencies that "knowingly" violated the state's Sunshine law could be fined up to \$10,000, in addition to potentially having to cover attorneys' fees. Accidental violators could be fined up to \$1,000, plus fees.

The attorney general's office already has lawyers investigating state agencies over alleged violations, and the bill would create a new office to ensure separation between attorneys suing and defending public agencies. That office would also centralize where local agencies could go to for legal advice.

There are only a few weeks left in the legislative session for bills to become law, and the bill must be voted on again before it heads to the Senate.

Some lawmakers expressed concern that the bill was being used as a political tool to defend Hawley against Democratic charges that he hasn't investigated the governor aggressively enough.

Hawley, who is running for U.S. Senate against Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill, announced Tuesday that he believed Greitens may have broken the law as he was campaigning for governor when he took a donor list from a charity he co-founded without the charity's permission and used it for political purposes. Hawley has also said

allegations about Greitens' behavior during a 2015 extramarital affair, detailed in a House committee report released last week, were potential grounds for impeachment. Both Hawley and Greitens are Republicans.

Greitens has denied committing any crimes, and his attorney has called into question Hawley's ability to investigate him impartially.