

## The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

## Index Journal

Locally owned since 1919

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Don't be dumb  
about vaccinations

Did you get your flu shot yet? How about your COVID vaccine? Or did you and your kids get vaccinated for measles?

No? Well that's why the state health department is forced to issue this kind of statement:

"Measles is highly contagious and there is risk for continued, rapid spread of the disease in the Upstate among communities with low immunization rates," said the state's epidemiologist, Dr. Linda Bell, on Thursday.



ANDY BRACK

EDITOR, PUBLISHER  
STATEHOUSE REPORT

Just having to issue such a statement must drive public health officials crazy. Why? Because measles was officially declared eliminated in the United States by the World Health Organization in 2000 — until preening politicians and anti-vaccination activists got in the business of spreading outright falsehoods about vaccinations. If people would turn off information from non-scientists and listen to the facts, they might understand vaccines are an incredibly strong treatment to keep communicable diseases at bay.

But no, they'd rather believe something they turn up in "research" based on some stupid post on the Internet than listen to scientists and doctors who actually know what they're talking about.

We wouldn't be having measles outbreaks in this country if the weirdo world would stop listening to the nonsense spewing out of the non-science mouths of "vaccine skeptics" like U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Yep — the guy who claimed a worm was eating his brain, who dumped a dead bear carcass in Central Park and who can't seem to get facts straight whenever testifying before Congress.

According to the state Department of Public Health (DPH), South Carolina now has eight confirmed cases of measles in the Upstate. While it may not sound like a lot, remember that measles spread more quickly than rabbits making new rabbits. And what's most worrisome to scientists, here and across the country, is how the unvaccinated people who have the disease got it from unknown sources, which indicates what Bell called "unrecognized community spread."

She said the department anticipates more cases will be identified.

"(We) implore community members to act responsibly," she said. "If you are ill, stay home. Notify a health care provider by phone of symptoms suggestive of measles before visiting a clinic. Follow guidance for control measures and cooperate with DPH investigations."

The painful virus spreads easily by air when someone with the disease breathes, coughs or sneezes.

"At this time, it is very important to get better protection against measles spread in our communities by increasing measles vaccination coverage."

Put more bluntly, if you are unvaccinated for measles, stop being stupid. Measles vaccines work and are safe, preventing infections with a 97% rate of effectiveness, according to the department.

"Measles virus can remain infectious in the air in a confined area for up to two hours after the sick person is gone from the area. People with measles should stay home from work and school and avoid contact with others for four days after their rash first appears."

If you're not vaccinated against measles — or against flu or COVID, for that matter — talk with a real doctor, listen and get the shots. Doing so is a community responsibility because it helps to keep everyone, including you and your loved ones, safer.

Learn more online about measles from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [cdc.gov/measles/vaccines/index.html](https://cdc.gov/measles/vaccines/index.html)

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## VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

## Who exercises the most hate?

I don't know everything, but I do know some things. I don't know everything about Charlie Kirk, but I do know when 94.5 used to air his show, I heard it pretty regularly, and I'd listen to it fairly often, but I never once recall him making a racist comment, nor anything remotely "Nazi-ish." Oddly, I've heard Antifa make both type comments and act in accordance with both (You can argue against that, but fascist-Nazis, in particularly, and communist both practice silencing alternative views, Antifa has done its best to silence any disagreement with their Theology).

Charlie Kirk was not my favorite radio personality. I didn't agree with everything he said. None-the-less, he did have the right to his opinion, and he did have the right to say it. I've never heard him espouse hatred, and I've never once heard him "talk down to any racial designation," I have heard Joe Biden, Ilhan Omar, Rashad Tahlil, and A.O.C. do both, and openly.

Sadly, the side that espouses "Tolerance" will tolerate no view other than their own, even to the point of extreme violence, then instead of addressing root causes, yell "gun control" and "hate speech" but who really exercises the most hate?

JAMES D. HOZEY  
Abbeville

## OUR VIEW

## Silence only fuels the fire

For those who aren't engrossed in the world of journalism like I am, I can understand why it would seem strange to get so riled up when questions go unanswered. Then again, maybe it's not so strange. Recently, there have been many questions, voiced met with a response of silence.

Calhoun Falls residents have been pleading with their government for months for answers about the town's finances and failing water utilities but have only received scraps of updates. In Ninety Six, residents have been made to go outside during executive sessions and closed-door meetings. Their meetings where they should be getting information, instead they spend their time outside.

The similarities between these two towns cannot be overlooked. But, at its core, it's the same issue: residents and their concerns continue to be ignored, as do questions from the Index-Journal. My job as a government reporter for your local newspaper includes trying to find answers to the questions residents are seeking. This week was a reminder of how frustrating government processes can be when those on the other end decide to stay silent.

It's as if they think covering their eyes and ears will make us just go away.

## Ninety Six

My reporting into Ninety Six began in June when a resident was called out directly by Mayor Gregg Brown during a council meeting for comments made on a community Facebook page. The resident was later ejected from the meeting by the chief of police, who made comments during that same meeting personally threatening to file three lawsuits against residents.

Ninety Six residents had been trying to find out for months about how American Rescue Plan Act funds were used by town officials, and it seems like residents asking pointed questions is frowned upon. When I asked for comment on why he ejected a resident from the meeting, the mayor ignored me. Chief of police Chris Porter responded to my questions about ejecting a resident, his lawsuits and overall decorum of the meeting. He responded back with "It's a NO to all of it but thank you for giving my attorney more evidence of slanderous activity."

The Index-Journal continued trying to glean information from the Town of Ninety Six when we sent two Freedom of Information requests in August. The first was for the town's Money Market Deposit Account (MMDA), a reserve fund that began in 2017. The second was for a forensic review performed in 2019 by Quick Group LLC. Initially in July, I repeatedly tried to get someone with council and town leadership to answer questions about the reserve fund account for the Aug. 1 article "The 153,000 General Journal entry."

I heard nothing but crickets from the town. This wasn't an isolated incident; practically every request for comment has been forwarded to Brown and met with little to no responses. And most recently, town administration is responding to questions by directing us to Ninety Six town attorney, Doug Bell. Emails to Bell have also gone unanswered.

Two weeks after the Aug. 1 story about the MMDA account was published, I received an email from Ninety Six Town Councilmember Bridget Porter in response to my July 29 email requesting clarification on how the MMDA had been used. Porter's reply said that she "cannot comment," and that answers to our requests would exceed "\$50" for the town's personnel to compile.

I then received an emailed letter from Brown saying my MMDA FOIA request was "too broad" and would cost \$1,000 to fulfill and that a third party accounting firm would have to be hired by the town to locate the information we'd asked for in our FOIA request.

Then Brown sent another email a week later that said there was an "on-going investigation" and "the town will update you" regarding the 2019 forensic accounting review.

Surprised that the price tag for fulfilling our request for information jumped from \$50 to \$1,000, I asked Brown for a breakdown of that \$1,000 fee, the name of the third party the town was using to fulfill the FOIA request, and I asked if the town could go ahead and provide documents, such as meeting minutes and bank statements,

Chief Porter <cporter@ninety-six.gov>  
To: Renee Ortiz

Reply Reply All Forward  
Wed 6/18/2025 5:04 PM

Follow up: Start by Thursday, June 19, 2025. Due by Thursday, June 19, 2025.  
This message is part of a tracked conversation. Click here to find all related messages or to open the original flagged message.

It's a NO to all of it but thank you for giving my attorney more evidence of slanderous activity. Have a nice day.

From: Renee Ortiz <rortiz@indexjournal.com>  
Sent: Wednesday, June 18, 2025 4:59 PM  
To: Chief Porter <cporter@ninety-six.gov>  
Subject: Re: Request for Comment – June 16 Council Meeting

Hello again,

Just wanted to verify are you saying you can't comment on the three lawsuits you're pursuing?

Do you have any comments about what took place on the Monday meeting in regard to a resident being thrown out by you and the mayor?

Thanks,  
Renee

Get Outlook for Android

From: Chief Porter <cporter@ninety-six.gov>  
Sent: Wednesday, June 18, 2025 4:03:18 PM  
To: Renee Ortiz <rortiz@indexjournal.com>  
Subject: Re: Request for Comment – June 16 Council Meeting

No, I can't comment, my attorney will comment on them in court.

RENEE ORTIZ | INDEX-JOURNAL

Screenshot of an email exchange between Index-Journal reporter Renee Ortiz and Ninety Six Police Chief Chris Porter on June 18, 2025. Porter declined to answer questions about lawsuits and accused Ortiz of providing "more evidence of slanderous activity."

which should be readily available.

You'd think the town would've been more open to discussing the MMDA and could easily put their hands on minutes and bank statements.

The town's own council drafted the rules it was supposed to follow regarding the MMDA, and, according to those rules, it should've documented every vote taken for the funds use and kept records of invoices and internal transfers. After all, this account at its peak had close to \$200K in 2021, but in 2025? Statements from May show the town had a little more than \$14K left in the account. Council and the mayor have yet to provide the current balance of the account.

Anyone would wonder: Where did the money go? Was the money used according to the rules set forth by council?

It would be two months before the Index-Journal learned anything substantial about either request. The only reason we finally received an update was because Certified Public Accountant Marc Wood of Camden, South Carolina-based firm Sheheen, Hancock & Godwin, LLP, who Ninety Six hired to fulfill the request, called to inform us of the cost of his time.

Brown said the town didn't have the time to fulfill our request so they "had to" hire outside help, which is where Wood came into the picture. Wood said he'd need 30-plus hours to find documents that should have been kept on-hand, and, at \$210 per hour, the work would cost \$6,000. Wood also told both me and my editor, Mundy Price, he didn't even know if the town still had some of the documents we were requesting. Wood also said even if he could locate the documents we were asking for, he didn't know if the files were organized in a way he would be able to easily find the info we wanted.

"I'm not doing this for free," Wood said. "I'll bill the town of Ninety Six, and then they're going to require y'all [the Index-Journal] to fight it"

Let me ask this: Why is it up to newspapers to pay for a municipality's bad book-keeping and a lack of trained employees?

The Public Official's Guide to Compliance with FOIA states if a town/city/state charges for finding, reviewing or blacking out records, they can only bill you at the hourly rate of the lowest-paid staff member who has the skills to do the job. The IRS requires businesses and municipalities to keep documents dating back at least seven years. Minutes of voting records should be taken every council meeting and made public. It would make sense that financial records would be available and organized by the town.

These records should be available, not just for the press, but most importantly for all Ninety Six residents. We do what we do at the IJ to inform the public so it can make its own judgments and hold leaders accountable.

Two formal requests for information should not have turned into a two-month game of email/phone tag. I shouldn't have been surprised, after all, residents have been voicing concerns about the lack of communication for years.

Ninety Six hasn't been the only town that has decided to play hardball with its residents and the press.

## Calhoun Falls

Back in May, after an interview with Viggo Lassen, a Calhoun Falls councilmember, I was told he had gathered an array of documents and was willing to send them to me after I filed a FOIA request. I emailed that request shortly after the interview. Lassen forwarded my email, copying the mayor, clerk, town attorney, town council and state representatives on the email. I never received

an acknowledgement of that request from anyone.

Acknowledgement and completion of FOIAs isn't an option, it's South Carolina law.

Now, I understand most of employees with Calhoun Falls have quit by now, the town is neck deep in a SLED investigation, while also trying to get their water system back on track and pass a budget. But back in May? The town still had full staff — the mass exodus didn't start until the beginning of July.

Former clerk Wendi Lewis wouldn't answer the IJ's calls or in-person questions; Mayor Terrico Holland refused to return emails or even answer his phone. No documents were provided to the press or residents during council meetings, and after the meetings adjourned, there was no opportunity to ask the mayor or clerk questions, and they were the two people with all the answers.

After months of silence and many glares during council meetings, I did a final check-in on Tuesday, Sept. 30. I heard from town attorney Juankell Shingles, who said he knew nothing about the request and was trying to coordinate with Lassen.

The next day, I received this email from Lassen, who finally responded to my FOIA check-in:

"Hey, just wanted to let you know ALL of the town files were mysteriously removed from the town hall a month ago, just after the acting town clerk had settled in. She contacted SLED and they came and investigated. I was not involved with any part of the investigation but am aware of it and just wanted to let you know. She has told me that she cannot discuss an ongoing investigation. I do not know if you are aware."

I was not aware there were no files left. To quote one of Mayor Holland's often-used sayings: "Thank you for that information."

Until Lassen's email, we had not been made aware that "ALL the town files" had been removed from town hall. What was in those files? Who took them?

Residents might never know.

Holland has gone radio silent. Lewis and most of the Calhoun Falls administration quit in July, and council seems to know about as much as I do. The skeleton crew who remain on payroll in Calhoun Falls is already stretched thin with the day-to-day operations.

Meanwhile, Calhoun Falls residents have continued to be kept in the dark.

Two towns, 50 miles apart, somehow sharing the same issues — a complete lack of organization, transparency and communication failures and questionable practices by town leadership. I've given both places ample opportunities to be forthcoming with information for their residents. Instead of taking any number of those opportunities, leadership stayed on-brand and continued to do what they have done this whole time — nothing.

If you can't keep your financial records straight, spending documented, answer your taxpayers' questions, have properly trained employees or simply provide meeting minutes that should be public information already, there's nothing else I can describe it as besides clown shows masquerading as governments.

In order for journalists to do our jobs, and for residents to be properly informed about how their money is used, we need a little help from local leadership. The old saying "honesty is the best policy" is especially true in government. But you can't tell the truth if you keep your mouth shut.

Residents and the press will continue to ask questions. Silence only fuels the fire.

Contact Renee Ortiz at 864-943-5643.  
Follow her on X: @By\_ReneeOrtiz