

Public records available by e-mail today

By DAN WIESSNER
O-D Albany bureau

ALBANY — Starting today, citizens in New York will be able to seek public records from state and local governments, and get them delivered via e-mail.

The measure, passed this year by the Legislature and signed by Gov. George Pataki, will greatly enhance the public's access to records their governments keep, officials said.

"This opens up a new era in terms of the relationship between the public and the government," said Robert Freeman, executive director of the state Committee on Open Government, who has overseen the administration of freedom-of-informa-

WHERE TO FIND IT

Forms for requesting records from government agencies via e-mail are available on the Committee on Open Government's website:

www.dos.state.ny.us/coog/emailrequest.htm

tion and open-meeting laws in the state for more than 30 years.

The aim of the New York legislation is to modernize the existing freedom of information law, or FOIL, and to make it easier and cheaper to access information. FOIL, enacted in the state in 1974, outlines the rights of the public to access government documents.

Legislators say that the law

will make it easier to get information from agencies by utilizing the technology that people use in their everyday lives.

"We're trying to make it as easy as we can for constituents in seeking information from their government — local and state," said Sen. Vincent Leibell, R-Putnam, Putnam County, who sponsored the bill. He added that while government agencies have generally been responsive to FOIL, the new law will "open up a whole new level of access to information."

"When FOIL went into law in 1974, 'high-tech' was a typewriter. E-mail has now become a way of life, and increasingly people obtain information through e-mail," Freeman said. "This law is

a sign of the times, and it will make life easier for agencies as well as those seeking information."

The law will make it cheaper to obtain copies of documents, because e-mail eliminates the document duplication fees that agencies charge. Under FOIL, an agency may charge up to 25 cents per photocopy. This can create fees of thousands of dollars for larger documents.

According to Freeman, transmitting records electronically will be beneficial to agencies as well as the public. He said that agencies would be able to identify records that are frequently requested and could then make them easier to access, perhaps by posting the records on a website.