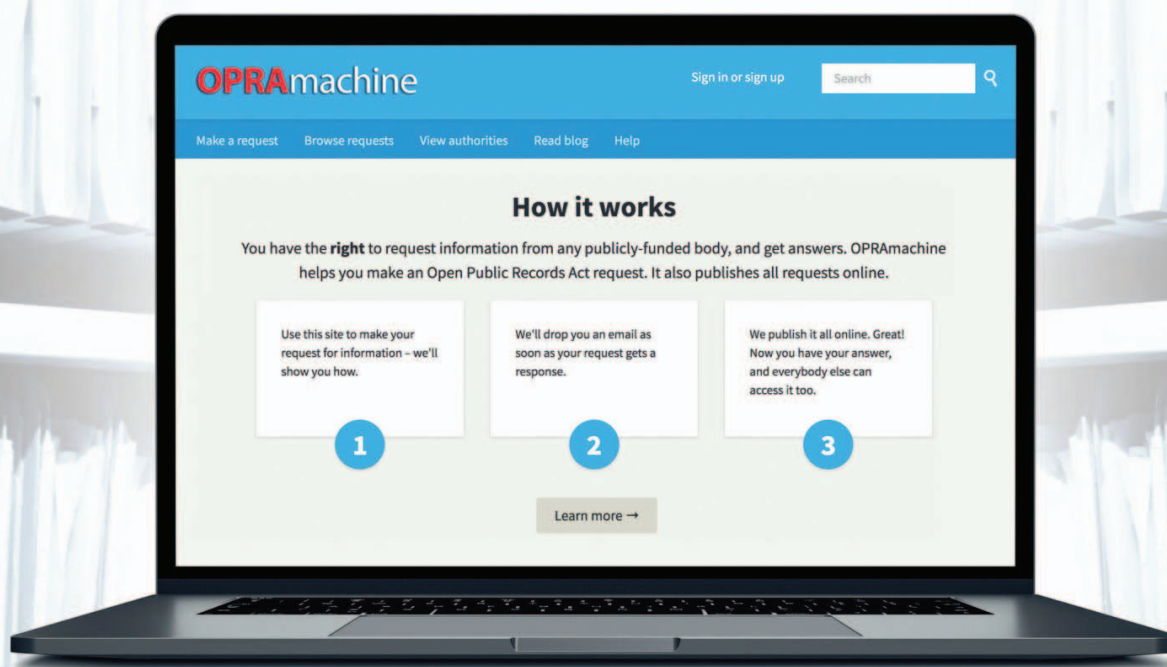


WEBSITE PUTS PUBLIC RECORDS AT YOUR FINGERTIPS



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College student committed to free flow of information

Gavin Rozzi was just 18 when he filed an open public records request with the Lacey Board of Education in 2015, seeking information about the compensation of the then-school board attorney. ■ The request was denied, but later overturned on appeal – two years later – by the Government Records Council. He also appealed the \$86 “special service fee” he was charged for copies of checks showing that the attorney was receiving health benefits through the district. That appeal, too, was ultimately decided in his favor. ■ But frustrated by the experience, Rozzi, an undergraduate at Stockton University at the time, set out to make the process easier for other citizens seeking government records. ■ The result was the website OPRAmachine, which allows anyone, with a few simple key strokes, to request public documents from more than 1,100 government entities in New Jersey – municipal, state, school board and inde-

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Public records

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pendent authorities – from the comfort of their home. It not only enables them to find out the status of the request, but the outcome of the request and, if successful, the documents themselves, which are posted on the website for all to see.

"Going through the process of challenging the Lacey school board's lack of OPRA compliance, and subsequently waiting two years for the GRC to render its decision was quite the education for me about the politics of public records in New Jersey," said Rozzi, now 22. "It showed me how the GRC is broken and ineffective at enforcing the public's right to know in a timely fashion."

New Jersey's Open Public Records Act is a freedom of information law that allows any citizen to request public records from state and local government agencies. The agencies must respond to the request within seven days. Denials can be appealed to the Government Records Council, but it can take months, or in Rozzi's case, years, to get a decision.

The website, which will be celebrating its second-year anniversary later this month, now has more than 5,000 monthly active users. It has been a boon for hard-core backbenchers, activists, average citizens interested in knowing more about their elected officials and policies, researchers, attorneys and journalists.

"The No. 1 advantage to the site is it removes the complexity and opacity to OPRA requests," Rozzi said.

The website is the first of its kind in the state and one of the first in the nation. A site called Muckrock functions in much the same way on the federal level.

Rozzi, a Lacey High School graduate who is pursuing a master's degree at Stockton University in data science & strategic analytics, has received acclaim far and wide for his website. He was the winner of the 2019 Excellence in Local News Award, given by Montclair State University's Center for Cooperative Media, for the site's innovative approach to public records.

The biggest source of satisfaction to Rozzi, however, is the feedback he gets from users. They are asked to indicate whether their request was successful, resulted in denials or was unresolved. Of the nearly 6,000 requests, 3,574 were marked successful, 982 unsuccessful and 1,457 either awaiting response or not classified.

The site is free for users willing to make their requests publicly available. Free user can make up to three public requests per day. Those wishing to keep their requests private are charged \$12 a month, as are those who want to make "batch requests" sent to multiple government entities.

The site provides additional value by allowing users to see all the information from other users — requests, status of the requests and the documents provided when requests are successful.

"What really gives me satisfaction," Rozzi said, "is when I hear from our users about the site has made a difference in their lives. I've heard from concerned citizens, attorneys, public officials and other stakeholders nearly every week since the site went live about how they used it to research something important to them or how they are grateful for my efforts to open up New Jersey govern-



The home page of Gavin Rozzi's OPRAmachine, opramachine.com. ASBURY PARK PRESS



ment. That alone has made all of the hard work of building and maintaining this system worth it."

Rozzi also was pleased when a group of Ocean County College students requested records regarding opiate overdoses in their communities and used the data as part of an assignment to make recommendations to local decision makers about how to address the opiate crisis.

It should be noted that Rozzi built the system himself and maintains it himself, devoting about five to seven hours a week to ensure it functions smoothly. He also has personally litigated court challenges to the site. He fought off a challenge from the Monmouth County Freeholders and Prosecutor's Office, who insisted that OPRA requests be made directly to the county through its own forms. It was a major victory for Rozzi and open, accessible government.

What's in Rozzi's future. In the short term, he is seeking a seat on the Lacey Board of Education next month. He wants to continue making enhancements to OPRAmachine and pursue other projects to make government more accessible. He also envisions pursuing a doctorate and teaching at the college level.

Randy Bergmann, a Westfield native and lifelong resident of New Jersey, has been covering the state as a reporter, editor and opinion page editor for four decades. Contact him at rbergmann@app.com or 732-643-4034.



The OPRA Machine website was awarded the Excellence in Local News Award in the "Innovate Local" category by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair University in February. COURTESY OF GAVIN ROZZI