

9-6-2011

Newsroom: RWU Law Hosts Open Government Summit

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Recommended Citation

Roger Williams University School of Law, "Newsroom: RWU Law Hosts Open Government Summit" (2011). *Life of the Law School (1993-)*. 252.

https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life/252

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Newsroom

RWU Law Hosts Open Government Summit

The Providence Journal reports on the 13th Annual Open Government Summit at RWU Law, with Rhode Island AG Peter Kilmartin '98 and Assistant AG Michael Field '97.

From the PROVIDENCE JOURNAL: ["R.I. attorney general backs access to records"](#) by Michael P.

McKinney, Journal Staff Writer



BRISTOL (August 6, 2011) — It was a meeting focused on such topics as open meetings in Rhode Island — then some protesters tried to open it up some more.

For more than 330 attendees, a mix of state and municipal officials, law enforcers, lawyers and others, **Friday's Open-Government Summit hosted by state Attorney General Peter F. Kilmartin [RWU Law '98] at the waterside Roger Williams University** was about delving into when a record is public versus confidential, open versus closed meetings and conflicts of interest.

For a group of protesters who greeted them as they drove in, it was about "Sheriff Pete." At the entrance to a university parking lot on Metacom Avenue, about 20 people opposed to Kilmartin's support for the Secure Communities federal program held signs and a makeshift model of Kilmartin as "Sheriff Pete" and chanted. The program, paid for through the federal Department of Homeland Security, aims at identifying and deporting the most dangerous criminal illegal immigrants.

In opening remarks in the university's law school, Kilmartin, a Roger Williams graduate, told a crowd of 175 or more sitting in a main hall — others watched or listened in from other rooms — that his department is committed to open government and to access to public records. He said that for the first time in the 13 years the state's attorneys general have held such a summit, the event was live-streamed.

“We are committed to continue to work with the legislature to make sure” there is meaningful access to public records, Kilmartin said, while also protecting privacy rights.

Shortly after Kilmartin’s remarks, a man in the audience stood up and attempted to address the crowd on what, he later said, were his views, opposed to Kilmartin’s support for the Secure Communities program. His words were drowned out by officials, who continued clapping for several minutes. A couple of people in the room held up a banner as well. Two other people attempted to address the crowd similarly, but again were drowned out by attendees’ extended applause. They were all escorted out. The protesters, both outside and inside, said they were part of the We Are All Arizona Coalition, made up of various community groups.

Asked about those who held signs at the parking lot entrance, Kilmartin said, “It’s their right” and offered no other comment.

Michael W. Field [RWU Law '97], an assistant attorney general, guided attendees through the state’s Access to Public Records Act, describing findings rendered by the attorney general’s office on whether documents should or should have not been released. For instance, he talked of cases in which records could have been released with some information removed to meet one of the many exemptions in the state’s public-records law. He cited an instance in which a Rhode Island school district denied a request to release teachers’ absenteeism statistics. But, Field said, the department found that the statistics should have been released without identifying the teachers.

Field went over the time requirements to respond to an Access to Public Records Act request. A response must come in 10 days, and that response can be to provide access to documents, deny access or to extend the time period for an additional 20 business days, he said. He noted a case last year in which the attorney general’s office found North Providence in violation because, while it did ultimately provide records related to the major flooding the region experienced, it provided them past the 10-day period and had not informed the person seeking them that it was extending the time.

Field said one thing public officials should consider is a “balancing test” in Rhode Island of whether “the privacy interest outweighs the public interest” or vice-versa in making decisions about records.

For full story, click [here](#).