

KHP REPORT LONG TIME COMING

PATRICK HENRY ONCE SAID THAT LIBERTY IS NEVER SECURE AS LONG AS GOVERNMENT DOES BUSINESS IN SECRET.

The Topeka Capital-Journal, April 22, 2008, by Ric Anderson

Apparently, a dog never ate Kansas Highway Patrol report No. 2008-004305.

But that's about the only excuse the KHP didn't offer about the report, which details the patrol's investigation into the April 4 accident involving the Topeka Police Department's Robinson R-44 helicopter.

The Topeka Capital-Journal began seeking a copy of the document on April 8 through a hand-delivered open records request.

Right away, this one started smelling like sushi left in a glove box in August.

When one of our reporters made a follow-up call to the KHP to inquire about the status of the open record request, he was told the agency never received it.

Remember that the next time you're thinking about turning in a murder weapon or some other piece of evidence. Best FedEx it instead, and make sure to save the tracking number.

Anyway, as we were preparing to submit another request, the KHP said it found the missing request.

Days went by. Still no report. Last Tuesday, 11 days after the crash, KHP administration said the document still wasn't finished.

Finally, last Friday morning, the KHP announced the report was done. But there was still a catch. The trooper assigned to write the report hadn't turned it in before he went home and went to bed, so the finished product wasn't going to be available until he got back to work.

Finally, at 5:45 p.m. Friday, the report was ready. And, boy, was it bursting with information. It identified the pilots and an observer aboard the helicopter at the time of the accidents — names that had already been reported — along with three paragraphs of narrative text that didn't include the cause of the accident.

So there you had it: 14 days to release time, date, place, names and three paragraphs of narrative that didn't say what caused the helicopter to go down. Gee, no wonder it took so long to produce.

The timing was fascinating, too. One of the key pieces of information The C-J had been seeking from the KHP was the name of the observer. What a coincidence that the report containing that name came out the day after the city released it, huh?

Granted, the patrol issued additional narrative on Monday that provided more explanation of why the accident occurred.

Still, the sequence must have third-grade teachers thinking they've heard this somewhere before. Let's recap: I didn't know about the assignment; I need more time to finish it; and, really, it's done but I was working so hard on it that I fell asleep and couldn't turn it in.

If all else fails, there's always the dog — or the K-9 unit — to blame.

***Do you have an Open Government experience to share?
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