

Sunshine Fest 2026 Recap

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Key takeaways

- **More participation:** Attendees up 56% from 149 in 2025 to 233 in 2026, with more sessions (from 9 to 20), speakers (from 49 to 87), state coalitions (from 17 to 20) and sponsors (from \$10,000 to \$43,000).
- **Few no shows:** Last year had a 16% no-show rate; This year was only 6%. Sold out within a few weeks.
- **High satisfaction:** Rating of the conference, overall, on a 1-5 scale: 4.75. Three-quarters said it was “outstanding” and 25% said it was “pretty good.” Nobody said it was bad.
- **Informative sessions,** on a 1-5 scale: 4.0; 79% said they were extremely or very informative.
- **Better than last year:** Of the people who attended in 2025, 84% said the 2026 conference was better.
- **Execution rated high:** 4.67; 97% said the conference was executed very well or extremely well.
- **Will be back:** 90% said they will attend next year, 10% said maybe.
- **Mixed on heading West:** When asked if they would attend in a more central part of the U.S., 55% said yes, 40% maybe, and 5% no.
- **Veer toward spring:** 35% said it doesn’t matter what time of year it is held, 38% said March during Sunshine Week, 15% fall, 6% winter.
- **Support for sponsorship:** 57% strongly support commercial sponsorships, 23% somewhat support, 21% neutral, nobody opposed.
- **Two days preferred:** Most people (80%) prefer two-day programming, 18% more than two days, and 2% one day.
- **Half from D.C. area:** Of those registered, 49% were from the D.C. area.
- **More diversity:** More speakers were female, people of color, from the states and from around the world.
- **Mixer turnout low:** Only 36% of registered attendees showed up for the Sunday mixer, most likely because locals did not want to make a special trip into downtown on a Sunday night (was 76% attendance in 2025 when it was held on a work night).
- **Returnees:** Of the 248 who registered, 65 had attended in 2025 (26%).

By the numbers

	2025		2026		Change
Sunshine Fest attendance					
Registered:	177		248		40%
Attended:	149		233		56%
No-shows:	28		15		-13
No-show rate:	16%		6%		-10%
Reception attendance numbers					
Total registered:	149		248		67%
Total attended:	113		91		-19%
No-show rate:	24%		64%		40%
Attendee sector mix					
Civil society	47	27%	72	29%	2%
Government	35	20%	36	15%	-5%
State FOI coalitions	26	15%	26	10%	-5%
Academia	23	13%	38	15%	2%
Journalism	21	12%	24	10%	-2%
Law	8	5%	6	2%	-3%
Corporate	11	6%	35	14%	7%
Funder	0	0%	4	2%	2%
Other	6	3%	7	3%	0%
Attendee geography mix					
D.C. area	94	42%	122	49%	7%
Speaker diversity					
Female:	23	47%	43	49%	2%
Persons of color:	7	14%	18	21%	7%
Global:	3	6%	7	8%	2%
State/local:	7	14%	17	20%	6%
Total speakers:	49		87		78%

Feedback survey

Completed online after the conference by 53 people (23% response rate for those attending).

1. Overall, what did you think of the conference?

4.75 on 1-5 scale with 1 being "Worst. Ever." and 5 "Outstanding"

Outstanding	40	75%
Pretty good	13	25%
Just OK	0	0%
Not that great	0	0%
Worst. Ever.	0	0%

2. If you attended Sunshine Fest in 2025, how would the 2026 Sunshine Fest compare?

4.04 on 1-5 scale with 1 being "much worse" and 5 "much better" (25 had attended 2025)

This year's is much better	9	36%
This year's is somewhat better	12	48%
Neutral	5	10%
This year's is somewhat worse	1	5%
This year's is much worse	0	0%

3. Overall, how informative were the sessions?

3.96 on 1-5 scale with 1 being not at all informative and 5 extremely informative

Extremely informative	12	23%
Very informative	29	56%
Informative	8	15%
Somewhat informative	3	6%
Not at all informative	0	0%

4. How useful was the Sunday mixer (if you attended)?

3.47 on 1-5 scale (30 had attended the mixer)

Extremely useful	7	23%
Very useful	10	33%
Moderately useful	6	20%
Slightly useful	4	13%
Not at all useful	3	10%

5. Overall, how well was the conference executed?

4.64 on 1-5 scale

Extremely well	36	69%
Very well	15	28%
Moderately well	2	3%
Slightly well	0	0%
Not well at all	0	0%

6. Would you attend a Sunshine Fest in 2027 in Washington, D.C.?

Yes:	47	90%
Maybe:	5	10%
No:	0	0%

7. **Would you attend a Sunshine Fest in 2027 in a more central part of the United States?**

Yes:	29	55%
Maybe:	21	40%
No:	3	5%

8. **Which time of year would you prefer Sunshine Fest to be held? We are considering shifting it to late September to avoid conflicts with spring break, legislative sessions, and other Sunshine Week events.**

Doesn't matter to me	18	35%
March, during Sunshine Week	20	38%
Fall (Sept. 28, Intl RTK Day)	8	15%
Summer	3	6%
March before or after SW	2	4%
Winter	1	2%

9. **Sponsorships are growing, particularly from corporations, which can help the conference become self-sustaining (imperative for its continuance). Programming has been and will continue to be completely independent of sponsorships - loyalty is to the attendees first. Do you support or not support corporate sponsorship for Sunshine Fest?**

4.36 on 1-5 scale

Strongly support	30	57%
Somewhat support	12	23%
Neutral	11	21%
Somewhat not supportive	0	0%
Strongly not supportive	0	0%

10. **In 2025, the conference was one day of programming. This year it was two full days of programming. Which would you prefer for 2027?**

Less than one day	0	0%
One day	1	2%
Two days	41	80%
More than two days	9	18%

Suggestions for 2027

Unedited with no negative comments omitted.

1. A brief, 15 minute video history of the Freedom of Information Act, shown at the beginning of the conference, in the theater.
2. Appreciated the state coalition scholarships to attend, so hopefully those can be continued in 2027. Also appreciated how you had to pivot due to the storm closure. I'm glad the networking reception for Monday could be scheduled for Tuesday--that was a lot of fun and actually a nice finisher to the conference, so perhaps consider keeping that on the second day in 2027.
3. As you saw this time, it's best to not invite Heritage Foundation trolls. Keep to that practice.
4. Better weather :-). In all seriousness, detailed discussion on the pros and cons of how to address problems. Groupthink is a powerful problem we want to completely avoid.

5. I agree with the view that we must be “sharper” in addressing the threats against Democracy and open government, censorship and stifling of the press.
11. I would like to see more of a balance between things that might be classified as "wishful thinking" or maybe "very ambitious long-term work" with short term ideas that are much more actionable and achievable to move the needle. I'd also like to see a "follow up" session. For the top vote ideas from last year, what has been done? I didn't see that this year, so I'm assuming there wasn't any connection between the big ideas from 2025 and their state of action in 2026. I think that is an opportunity.
12. On the balance between long term and short term, there seems to be a bias in all topics towards discussion or ideas that are fundamentally about making it easier to pedal against all the FOIA headwinds that everyone talks about much less so about changing the headwinds themselves. For example in the crowdsourced ideas list, every solution except one was a big picture idea that is almost entirely out of the control of this group and would require some combination of new law, new funding, new taxes, lobbying, a new administration, new government entities, retraining 100s of thousands of people (or even all of those at once). All to try and deal with the problems of the current system instead of avoiding those problems. All of them were expensive and would be measured in decades to achieve. I am not trying to discount the importance of long-lead big picture thinking, but I am questioning whether the balance between big-picture-long-lead topics and shorter-term-actionable topics might get a little more balanced. I'd call it 97% / 3% this year. For example, of all the ideas submitted in the session or on line only one of them is actually something this group could reasonably advocate for and achieve on its own efforts, un gated by any legislative body or tax. It wasn't my idea, so there is no self-promotion here. That idea was the one about choosing to label all journalism that depended on FOIA/FOIL with a common logo. The people in the room, plus the thousands of kindred spirits as professional journalists, open government advocates, and so forth could in fact go do that without anyone's permission, law, or political change. The biggest debate would be over what the logo should look like. But that idea got almost no attention, despite it being almost completely within the professional realm of the people in the room and by extension their colleagues. One other idea, which is still big-picture-long-term, would have gotten at the root cause and was about flipping the paradigm so data starts open (I have had that idea myself before, so I am guessing it has been an idea for many years).
13. I would love for more collaboration with ASAP on Sunshine fest.
14. I would blow up the plenary/keynotes and have more sessions.
15. If possible, partner with ASAP or otherwise include elements that can be considered training for federal GIS staff so that it can serve as annual training requirement fulfillment, facilitating agency-approval for government attendees.
16. In the theatre room I would like to see a panel of federal employees express their experiences for requesters to understand.
17. Increase attendee capacity
18. Better setup for vendor demo space
19. It could be helpful to use QR codes for the sessions so that people can directly submit questions to the session moderators, who can then prioritize questions. It would also allow there to be less of a need to pass microphones around.
20. It was nice to have a lot of networking breaks, but some people have a hard time just going up to people and talking to them. I felt like it was easier to talk to others at the lunches and also at the opening reception at SPIN. I think maybe at the networking area at the Bloomberg Center it felt too spread out, like it was hard to talk to someone sitting across

from you because the seats were a bit too far apart. I think maybe having the reception in the lunch area so it is easier to join a table and talk to people when you are not sure who to go to talk to. More extroverted people probably are fine with the way most of the networking was set up, so maybe just having the lunch and reception with the large tables and the rest of the networking how it was would make everyone happy.

21. Larger space, but I know you are already doing that.
22. More input from current/former FOIA staff. Fewer breakouts at the same time, or duplicate sessions.
23. No tornados.
24. None - I appreciate the hard work that went into the event. I learned a lot in our short time and hope to attend again in the future!
25. Not a suggestion here, but a hat tip to everyone who worked to roll with the punches after our building closure to make sure as many sessions as possible could be held on Tuesday. That was impressive improvisation. Well done, team!
26. As with last year, there were SO many sessions that I wanted to attend that were scheduled against one another. The tyranny of choices!
27. Some hands on workshops could be helpful
28. The conference was really well put together. It may be useful for someone to keep stack or being in charge of questions outside the moderator in plenaries.
29. The conference was very well executed and organized. Albeit the weather and unexpected changes, I have no complaints, no notes. Thank you, Dave, and the Brechner Center for all your efforts.
30. The Sunday mixer--music was too loud for "mixing". Need a setup that allows for easy conversation. Great food, though.
31. Two days make sense for those of us who are already traveling so far. I also appreciate that a lot of networking time is built in.
32. Curious whether there is an opportunity to shift to the same week as the Yale Access & Accountability Conference, given some overlap in goals. But traveling to New Haven is much harder. That conference is also much more legal focused and feels academic, so I wouldn't want to take away from Sunshine Fest's very practical and collaborative focus.
33. What happened since last year catch up with panelists. More Advocacy and advancing work. We have to improve the process for everyone, including government employees.
34. You've covered a lot of ground and it was a terrific conference. Hard to say how to improve it other than keep incorporating timely topics that relate to FOI issues in the news and public discourse. Thanks for all your work on this.
35. You're doing the right thing. It might be worth having an unconference element, where people can self organize a few of the conversations instead of the big presentations that can be hit or miss.

Favorite sessions

1. I thought the plenary sessions were probably the most useful, because they spoke more generally (and sometimes specifically) about promoting FOI issues and making them more relevant to the public. I'm part of a state FOI group that advises reporters and the public on state FOI requests and open meetings.
2. For me, the less useful stuff was the advice on how to acquire documents and report on documents, particularly federal FOI. We're a state group, so federal FOI is not our concern. And, we don't spend time ourselves acquiring documents, or reporting on documents. We

promote FOI and help other people overcome obstacles to getting info. We pretty much know the ins and outs of state document-hunting.

3. I would've liked to hear the seminar on FOI litigation. Wasn't that canceled?
4. Adam Marshall's RAG demo.
5. Agency best practices was very useful especially by including a federal agency as a speaker gave insight into their procedures but also what other agencies can do. Funding FOI was not as helpful as I anticipated especially regarding funding for state/nonprofit coalitions. I would appreciate more variety for funding possibly from a consultant, independent funder or analysis of what organizations can do to better market themselves.
6. Agency Best Practices. This session gave a look into how other agencies handle FOIA.
7. Vendor Demos. As we move into an area of AI, this devoted time was extremely informative as well.
8. Commercial Partnership. Gave great insight on their perspective of Privacy Information.
9. Court transparency.
10. I didn't attend as many as I planned with the weather disruption and travel but the session on court records was most relevant to my work and I appreciated the diverse perspectives on the panel.
11. I enjoyed everything I attended. It's hard to say what was most or least useful since programming was canceled early Monday due to the weather (totally understand, but still disappointing) and I had to leave midday Tuesday to catch a flight back home. The Access Strategies session was probably the most useful for me as a journalist. I wish I could have attended the FOI Journalism and Transparency Tool Time sessions too. Not as useful (but inspiring and enjoyable): FOI champions and Big Ideas for Improving FOI plenary sessions.
12. I found each session I attended extremely useful. The one recommendation I have is logistical - if we could find a space that would allow more people to attend, that would be best, although the Hopkins building was great in many respects.
13. I found the FOI Champions plenary inspiring and the Big Ideas plenary motivating.
14. I found there to be a more superficial discussion of solutions to the problems facing transparency. I think there needs to be more detailed discussions addressing the realities of general solutions. While many seem good on their face, they are either unrealistic in getting passed or cause other logistical problems.
15. I only attended 2 plus a luncheon but was super impressed with the level of dialogue and the ideas I took away. I would have liked to attend the whole thing.
16. I really enjoyed the "advise the advisers" panel, which while sparsely attended, the small size enabled a very free flowing conversation between the speaker and members of the audience. More and smaller sessions could enable better seminar-style conversations that are more fruitful than large panel discussions with a short time for questions at the end.
17. I really like participation from Government employees. more of that please. On the other side, I would like more advocacy and advancing content, of how to push the right to know further at all levels.
18. I unfortunately was not able to attend and watched online the events that were broadcasted. It would have been nice to offer more online live participation for some of the breakouts.
19. Immigration
20. immigration, FOI for journalists
21. Miranda Spivack's plenary on Day 2 was excellent and useful to showing all of us that open records requests don't have to come from old white men. The 19 - 87 age range was impressive as were their stories! Also found session on Advice for the Advisors helpful.

22. Panel with former FDA FOIA Officer, Jason Leopold as a requester, and local/state level requester. It was helpful for me to understand more about the experiences of requesters.
23. Police Transparency because it is particularly pertinent to some proposed legislation in Tennessee to exempt a new state police unit from open records.
24. Promoting Transparency, Future of FOI, and Immigration were the most useful for my work and provided the most insight for me as a requester in the nonprofit sector. There wasn't anything that I found to be not useful, but those sessions in particular just stuck out to me as being especially useful.
25. Sessions about using FOIA in journalism and other sessions related to journalism.
26. Sessions that discuss solutions to the FOI problem, including the best strategies for access (user side) and the use of AI technology to deal with backlog and submission (user and provider sides). I loved the emphasis on solutions and we need more of it!
27. Special topics like "Criminalizing FOI" are a nice touch and add variety, and some could become regular features every year.
28. State NFOIC meetups.
29. The breakouts were most useful (I attended the ones on vexatious requesters, transparency tool time, and FOI in journalism). The plenary sessions were least useful, though I understand their purpose isn't so much utility as bigger picture. They probably could have been shorter. Appreciated the state coalition lunches and opportunity to share notes, learn how to build the coalitions, etc.
30. The criminalization session was very eye-opening for me.
31. The crowdsourced idea list was my most useful... and also a candidate for least useful. It depends on what the intent is for that information. If it is a list that generates input to advocacy groups and feeds into discussions of lobbying or legislative actions by appropriate groups, great. That means all the good discussion was for a purpose. If it does not have a follow up during the rest of year then I have to ask if the time was spent well. This question comes from my ignorance. I simply don't know what happens subsequent to gathering that information from attendees.
32. The FOIA strategy session with Jason Leopold and Nate Jones (and Diana Fuentes).
33. The fundraising guidance from Kimberly Spencer of the Colorado Media Project during Tuesday's lunch with coalition leaders was the most practical and useful for me. The funding FOI breakout session was also useful. Really, each breakout session I attended was strong; the two others were the ones on research and on police transparency. It's just a bummer that we missed an afternoon of breakout sessions because of a hyperbolic weather forecast! One suggestion: I had interest in several other breakout sessions but couldn't attend them because they ran concurrently. Perhaps some of the breakout sessions could be repeated? Also, perhaps start the day at 8:30 instead of 9 and shorten the breakout sessions to an hour to fit in more sessions?
34. The kickoff panel was once again useful and inspiring and gave a good overview. The vexatious requester panel was particularly helpful for my job. The building shutting down Monday at 1 pm was unfortunate but you did a great job regrouping the sessions. As a state coalition leader, I got a lot out of the two coalition lunch meetings!
35. The Police Transparency one was the most useful to me for my needs. Access Strategies also had very helpful information. I really would have liked to attend the litigation session, but it was cancelled due to the weather. I found the vexatious request session to be pretty much a reiteration of last year's session.
36. The problem wasn't the conference, but me. I had a number of competing things happening, especially on Tuesday, that made it hard to be present the full time. This year

Sunshine Fest lined up with the start of the appropriations process and everyone decided to have their conferences at the same time.

37. The session with citizens who used FOIA.
38. The session with requestors was excellent, inspiring to see people in their teens alongside people in their 80s using their rights. Enjoyed the breakouts with journalists as well, was sorry to miss some of the others due to the unavoidable impact of the weather meaning a lot of the breakouts were simultaneous. Plenary's were all good.
39. Enjoyed the journalist session.
40. Sad to not get to see the litigation session.
41. Transparency Tool Time: the brief synopsis of Tech companies providing information about their company, help us to decide if we have interest. Thereafter, it was great to see the demos to allow us to make a decision for a follow-up call.
42. Advice for Advisers: We will take into consideration the suggestions the FOIA Advisory Committee provided for the agencies.
43. Vexatious & Agency best practices sessions were very helpful. Hearing both sides (requester & processor) was highly beneficial.
44. Vexatious on Monday, Journalism on Tuesday.
45. Vexatious requesters -- because it suggested options that could work if confronted with a legislative push to rein in such requests.

Breakout session counts

Monday 10:45-11:55 a.m.	Count	Percent
Carnage and backslide	80	49%
Vexatious requests	42	26%
Court transparency	26	16%
Research	16	10%
TOTAL	164	

Tuesday 10:45-11:55 a.m.		
Transparency Tool Time	51	34%
Access strategies	27	18%
Immigration	27	18%
Criminalizing FOI	22	14%
Funding FOI	20	13%
Commercial partnerships	5	2%
TOTAL	152	

Tuesday 3-4:15 p.m.		
FOI journalism	33	32%
Agency best practices	30	29%
Police transparency	18	17%
Advice for advisers	16	15%
FOIA at 60	7	7%
TOTAL	104	