

Baldwin scores high in survey

► City of Mobile also ranked high in how many public records available on Internet

By **DAN MURTAUGH**

Staff Reporter

Baldwin County and the city of Mobile both ranked high in a new survey of how many public records Alabama municipal and county governments make available online.

The survey was put together by a group of 10 graduate journalism fellows at the University of Alabama studying with professor Chris Roberts, a former Birmingham News reporter.

The students did the project as part of Sunshine Week — a national initiative to create a dialogue about the importance of open government and freedom of information — which begins today.

Results of the survey can be found online at www.chrisrob.com/sunshine.

Roberts said he and his students decided to focus on online records because of how easy and cheap it is to access information online.

"There are difficulties in getting records at all," Roberts said. "You have to find a parking place near the courthouse, go inside and find the agenda. ... It's just as easy, and cheaper in the long run, for the county to put it online in some format."

The class put together a list of 18 types of records they would look for, from meeting agendas to property values, and began searching the Web sites of all counties and every city in Alabama with more than 4,000 people.

ON THE NET

Rankings:

www.chrisrob.com/sunshine/

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▶Continued from Page 1B

Baldwin County placed first among all the counties in the state, with access to all but one type of record: law enforcement incident reports.

"It was a real impressive showing for Baldwin," Roberts said.

David Pimperl, Baldwin County's communication and information systems director, said county commission-

ers and elected officials have created an environment that fosters open government.

"There's just been a concerted effort from all the different offices to want to put information out there for the citizens," he said.

The city of Mobile also had a good showing in the survey, with available records in all but a few categories.

The state as a whole still has great lengths to go. Roberts said 25 of the state's 67

counties don't even have an official Web site.

Roberts said he hopes that as governments update their Web sites, the project will give officials an idea of what information the public is looking for online.

"At the very least, you need access to meeting minutes and agendas," he said. "That way you know whether you need to go to a meeting."

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