

Feb. 3, 2025

Dear judges,

The pursuit of, and fight for, public records continued to drive some of The Baltimore Banner's most important investigative, enterprise and accountability journalism in 2024. While our work covering issues within Baltimore City remains vital to The Banner's mission, our year was also marked by strong public records reporting in other areas, including Harford, Howard, Anne Arundel and Baltimore counties and statewide.

Reporter Ben Conarck relied heavily on the state's Public Information Act to access information that law enforcement agencies might have preferred not to hand over. The most notable example of this came from his reporting on the abnormally high rate of suicide at the Harford County Detention Center. After initially requesting mortality records from every local jail in the state, he zeroed in on Harford County, which had a [string of five suicides](#) in a three-year period, exceeding state and national averages.

Conarck also relied on the PIA for one of his other [investigations](#) last year, using it to identify court cases of telephone misuse from the Baltimore County State's Attorney's Office. These cases demonstrated how law enforcement was criminalizing some people with mental health issues who were experiencing behavioral crises.

When Howard County reporter Jess Nocera and investigative reporter Brenna Smith noticed an anonymous website that seemed to become a growing ledger of grievances against Howard Community College President Daria Willis, public records from HCC, Howard County government and the Maryland Higher Education Commission, along with dozens of interviews, helped The Banner [provide a fuller accounting of what was going on](#) at the college by providing additional transparency about what was happening behind the scenes.

For months, state officials said they couldn't discuss anything about an incident in which a state police officer had used a Taser on a child, citing a state law requiring secrecy in incidents involving juveniles. But another law, designed to make police disciplinary files accessible to the public, proved effective at eking out more transparency regarding the incident. Banner investigative reporter Justin Fenton obtained more than 100 pages of records from the internal investigative file, including the officer's claim that he [fired two Taser prongs into the boy by accident](#).

In Baltimore City, The Banner used public records to shed light on problems between the city and a developer of an ambitious planned rejuvenation of a West Baltimore neighborhood called Poppleton. Emails between the developer, La Cité, and Baltimore officials reveal that the unpaid water bills [inflamed an already strained relationship](#) — and contributed to the city's decision to end La Cité's future development rights in Poppleton.

Reporter Lee Sanderlin spent months in pursuit of a list of firearms the Baltimore Police Department had recovered over the years. A prosecutor source told him to ask for “Firearm Operability Reports,” which tell you the capacity of magazines included with the weapon, any accessories, make, model, serial number and date recovered, among other things. That led us to additional records and reporting that produced a pair of important stories, that [ghost guns make up 20% of crime-related guns in Baltimore](#) and that the city now has [a machine gun problem](#), as tiny devices that make a handgun fully automatic are appearing more frequently on city streets.

The Banner’s use of public documents and data was essential in our coverage of one of 2024’s biggest stories, the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge. We found numerous other instances of ships [experiencing propulsion loss](#) as the Dali did before it collided with the bridge. We found that the bridge was one of 17,000 bridges in the country, about 3%, characterized as having a “[fracture critical](#)” design, meaning if one portion sustained enough damage, the entire structure would collapse. We also tracked the disturbing trend of trucks [carrying hazardous materials illegally travelling through Baltimore’s two tunnels](#) in the aftermath of the collapse, with data showing that authorities were doing little in the way of stepping up inspections of those vehicles.

Those are just some of the examples that demonstrate The Banner’s extensive use of public records to reveal important truths and hold the powerful accountable. For this, we submit this nomination for the James S. Keat Freedom of Information Award from the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association.

Richard Martin
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