

Do your eyes glaze over or do you mumble the phrase “damn politicians” when you hear or read the term “open government”?

Or worse, does it bring to mind the image of a large headline announcing the latest misdeed or misstep of a government official?

Or is it more complicated than that?

Actually, it's much simpler than that. The concept of open government goes back to the old constitutional principle of “the consent of the governed.” Our elected officials and public employees do their jobs in our names with our dollars.

We're the boss. They're the employees.

And the boss – that's you and your neighbors – need regular, complete and honest reports from their employees to perform their oversight role.

Like any supervisor, you need to see the monthly balance sheet and the list of bills paid and due to make sure budget and deadlines are met and the money (your tax dollars) are being spent appropriately and responsibly.

If that information shows there are problems – and no organization, government or otherwise, runs problem free, that information is used by you – the boss – to make management decisions. If the problems aren't corrected after they are pointed out, the decision might be to replace an employee via a ballot on the next election day.

Washington has two laws that help citizens and watchdog groups like the news media ensure that our government agencies are operating in an open and accountable manner. They are the Open Meeting Act, which details how the governing bodies of public agencies – city council, county commissions, school boards, PUD boards, etc. – must meet and vote with citizens present to observe. The second is the Open Public Records Act, which says that virtually every document produced by a government agency (with very narrow exceptions) must be turned over to any citizen that wants to see it.

Sounds straightforward enough. And it is – until an agency decides for whatever reason it doesn't want to turn over a document and a citizen must sue – on his or her own dime – to get it.

You can learn more about this labor-management relationship, and why it can get complicated and contentious, and a free public forum in Colville on Wednesday, June 15 from 6 to 8 p.m. At Ag & Trade Center at the Northeast Washington Fairgrounds. At the gathering, sponsored by the Washington Coalition for Open Government, a panel of expert presenters will fuel the discussion on securing and preserving the public's legal right to access the records and proceedings of the government agencies created to serve the people of the state. The panelists include: Attorney Steven Dixson of the Spokane law firm Witherspoon Kelley, State Archivist Jerry Handfield, former State Representative Toby Nixon, president of the coalition; and D. Edson Clark of the accounting firm Clark Raymond. David Seago, former editorial page editor of the Tacoma News Tribune will act as moderator.

The forum is free and open to all, and questions and comments from the audience are welcome.

You'll also learn more about the Washington Coalition for Open Government, a statewide non-partisan, non profit group of individuals and organizations dedicated to strengthening and preserving the public's right to know what its government is doing. The Coalition has presented a series of similar programs around the state to educate the citizens of Washington on their rights of access.

We hope to see you there on June 15.

*Bill Will is executive director of Washington Newspaper Publishers Association and a longtime board member of the Washington Coalition for Open Government. He knows the proper pronunciation of “Callville.”*