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Open government is core American value

By Toby Nixon

The concept of open government quickly gets to the core of who we are, as a community, as a state and as a nation.

For more than 200 years, Americans have been part of a grand experiment in self government based on laws. It's an ambitious civic model that's idealistic, hopeful and frankly at odds with much of history. But it works.

It doesn't work very well, however, if a key ingredient is missing: informed citizens. Citizens need to know what their government is doing. For example, is it operating efficiently, fairly and in the best interest of the public?

That's why the concept of open government is so powerful and empowering, and why open-government laws are essential. Despite our democratic ideal that government is an instrument of the people, our state's open records and meetings laws are under constant challenge.

The recent controversy over the release of e-mails sent by a Kirkland city council member raised questions about whether private e-mails should remain private even if sent through a city e-mail system.

Several bills have been introduced this year in Olympia threatening to raise the cost of access to records, exempt some agencies from the law entirely, and create roadblocks to lawsuits to force agencies to comply with the law.

Over the years, state and federal lawmakers, along with the courts, have made hundreds of exceptions to Washington's public disclosure laws, which originated with a citizens' initiative in 1972 that passed with more than 72 percent approval. This year, several more exceptions have been proposed – and the Governor has proposed eliminating the Sunshine Committee that reviews them.

Last year, a federal judge in Tacoma ordered secrecy for one of our most public and important civic acts – the collecting of signatures on a citizens' ballot initiative. The issue will be taken up this year by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Such erosions are what led to the formation of the Washington Coalition for Open Government, which is a nonpartisan, nonprofit advocate of making sure state and local governments are accessible to their citizens.

That's a big-tent idea, as demonstrated by the variety of people and organizations under the tent.

The coalition's board members represent business and environmental groups, government and the media, free-market and civil-liberties groups, and labor unions, among others.

It's a diverse group united by a powerful idea: that government should be transparent and accountable to its citizens. In order for citizens to know whether their government is acting wisely on their behalf, they need to know first what their government is doing, and why. An informed citizenry is an essential ingredient in our remarkable experiment in self-rule.

Toby Nixon, a former state representative from the 47th District, is president of the Washington Coalition for Open Government.