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Transparency and democracy

By Mike Fancher

"The time has come for new thinking and aggressive action to dramatically improve the information opportunities available to the American people, the information health of the country's communities and the information vitality of our democracy."

Those are the opening words of the recently released report of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy. The commission concluded that America is at a critical juncture in the history of communications.

"The digital age is creating an information and communications renaissance. But it is not serving all Americans and their local communities equally. It is not yet serving democracy fully," the commission warned. "How we react, individually and collectively, to this democratic shortfall will affect the quality of our lives and the very nature of our communities."

One of the commission's recommendations is that governments at all levels be required to operate transparently. Governments should facilitate easy and low-cost access to public records, and make civic and social data available in standardized formats.

The philosophy behind this recommendation is simple: "People need relevant and credible information to be free and self-governing.... Public information belongs to the public. Government must be more open."

The commission's words echo the preamble to Washington state's open government law, which says:

"The people of this state do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them. The people, in delegating authority, do not give their public servants the right to decide what is good for the people to know and what is not good for them to know. The people insist on remaining informed so that they may retain control over the instruments they have created."

Washington's modern history of open government legislation began with a citizens' initiative in 1972. Preserving and protecting the intent of that initiative is an ongoing battle. Like waves on a beach, the forces that would erode protections for open records and meetings are constant.

For example, the original open records law listed only 10 exceptions to the general rule that all government records must be open to the public. Today there are more than 300 additional exemptions that have been added by the Legislature, with more introduced every legislative session.

The most powerful force against this erosion is the voice of the people. The Washington Coalition for Open Government was founded in 2002 to amplify that voice. WCOG is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that includes citizen activists, government officials, and representatives of business, labor, media, law and public policy organizations.

The coalition is dedicated to strengthening and preserving the public's right to know what its government is doing. It is vigilant in working through the courts and the Legislature to defend and strengthen Washington's open government laws. It recognizes and celebrates individuals and groups, including those in government, who stand up for the public's right to know.

Perhaps most importantly, WCOG educates the citizens about their right to access government information. WCOG conducts public forums throughout the state to help citizens understand the importance of open government and how to use the law effectively.

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