

**Op-Ed, Moscow-Pullman Daily News**  
**Open-government laws go to the heart of America's grand experiment**

**To run in advance of an Oct. 12, 2011, open-government forum**

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This summer's disturbing murder-suicide of a former University of Idaho professor and a graduate student understandably rattled the citizens of Moscow and Pullman.

Former psychology professor Ernesto Bustamante killed himself in August after fatally shooting Katy Benoit, a graduate student who had dated him. Details about Bustamante and his behavior that emerged from public records only raised more questions about the university's actions leading up to the tragic event.

He was involved in a separate domestic violence case with another woman. The professor had "multiple personality disorders," police said. Bustamante had a tumultuous relationship with Benoit before she ended it. Benoit filed a complaint with the university two months before she died.

But other than noting that Bustamante had recently resigned, the university said little about how it managed the situation, citing secrecy provisions for personnel records in state law.

Did the university act wisely? For weeks after the shootings, citizens had too little information to know. The public's inability to evaluate their university's actions underscored the value of one of our nation's grandest ideas, the concept of open government.

For more than 200 years, Americans have been part of a great experiment in self rule based on laws. It's an ambitious civic model that's idealistic and hopeful and at odds with much of human history. But it works. It doesn't work very well, however, if a key ingredient is missing: informed citizens.

They need to know what their government is doing. They need to know whether it is operating efficiently, fairly and in their best interest.

Citizens may eventually know whether the University of Idaho did the right thing. The university asked Latah District Court to rule on whether the personnel records of a deceased former employee can be made public. The judge scheduled oral arguments for earlier this month.

Meanwhile, a few days from now, residents of Moscow and Pullman can take part in a free public forum about open government.

The two-hour program begins at 6 p.m. Oct. 12 at the Neill Public Library, 210 N. Grand Ave., in Pullman. The event is being presented by the League of Women Voters of Pullman and the Washington Coalition for Open Government.

The program will feature a discussion by a panel of experts moderated by Anna King, a broadcast journalist with the Northwest News Network.

The scheduled panelists are:

- Connie Newman, a member of the Palouse City Council.
- Toby Nixon, WCOG president and a former state legislator.
- Washington state Archivist Jerry Handfield, a leader in efforts to make millions of state and local government documents available to the public online.
- Steve Dixson, an attorney with the Spokane law firm of Witherspoon Kelley. He was one of the lawyers who defended Washington state's Public Records Act against a First Amendment challenge before the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case *Doe v. Reed*.

The panelists will have a lot to talk about. Open government is a big-tent idea, and one that is remarkably free of partisanship, as demonstrated by the variety of people and organizations that makes up WCOG.

The nonprofit coalition's board members represent multiple interests – business, labor, government, the press, free-market organizations, civil liberties groups, the legal community and various individuals, among others.

Their outlooks are diverse, but they are united by a powerful idea: that civic life matters, and that government should be transparent and accountable to its citizens.

They know the ability of citizens to supervise their own government is essential to the future of our remarkable experiment – America's bold undertaking in self rule.

*George Erb is the editor of the Puget Sound Business Journal in Seattle and a board member of the Washington Coalition for Open Government.*