

Op-Ed, Skamania County Pioneer Skamania County case underscores value of open-government laws

To run in advance of May 18, 2011, open-government forum

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Stevenson resident Gloria Howell had suspicions about the Skamania County Auditor's Office. But instead of keeping her concerns to herself, Howell reached for a civic tool that's available to every Washington resident – the state's public-records laws.

She enlisted the help of attorney Brad Andersen, and filed a public records request for the county agency's expense reports.

What they discovered led to the resignation of county Auditor J. Michael Garvison and prompted separate investigations by the Skamania County Sheriff's Office and the Washington state Auditor's Office.

Howell and Andersen's story underscores the practical value of the state's open records and meetings laws. It also highlights the power of a much larger idea, the concept of open government.

For more than 200 years, Americans have been part of a grand 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.

The story of Howell and Andersen illustrates that point perfectly.

They both have active civic lives. Howell was a school board member for many years, and Andersen served two terms as Skamania County Prosecutor. While that gave them an extra dose of savvy, they still used state laws that are available to all.

By using the open-records laws, they forced the county auditor's office to release its public expense reports. The documents revealed about \$87,000 in questionable spending of taxpayer money, including \$39,000 allegedly spent on unauthorized out-of-state travel.

They did what the authors of the state's open-records laws intended: They found out what their government was doing and held it accountable.

Because of Howell and Andersen's work, the Washington Coalition for Open Government (WCOG) in 2010 presented them with Key Awards. In March, the American Society of Newspaper Editors recognized Howell by naming her the 2011 recipient of its national Local Heroes award.

Their story shows that open government is no mere abstraction, but a potent idea that empowers citizens. It helps shape the relationship between government and the governed.

A few days from now, residents of Stevenson and nearby communities can take part in a free public forum about open government.

The two-hour program begins at 5:30 p.m. May 18 at the Stevenson Community Library, 120 N.W. Vancouver Ave. in Stevenson. WCOG is presenting the event, which is sponsored by the Pacific Northwest law firm of Schwabe Williamson & Wyatt.

At the heart of the program is a discussion by a panel of experts moderated by Stevenson High School graduate Sam Pace, a WCOG board member who is now a housing specialist for the Seattle-King County Association of Realtors.

The scheduled panelists are:

- Olympia attorney Greg Overstreet, a principal of the Allied Law Group and a former Open Government Ombudsman with the Washington state Office of the Attorney General.
- 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.
- Andersen, the attorney who advised Howell and who is also active in local business and economic-development groups.
- Howell, the former school board member who uncovered questionable spending by the county auditor's office.

There is much 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 and a board member of the Washington Coalition for Open Government.