



For Immediate Release

For More Information Contact:

- Toby Nixon, President, Washington Coalition for Open Government: President@WashingtonCOG.org
- Sam Pace, Treasurer, Washington Coalition for Open Government: (253) 569-2663 SamPace@Concentric.net
- Tim Franklin's statements available on-line at: <http://www.sunshineweek.org/LocalHeroes.aspx>

Gloria Howell of Stevenson, Washington, nominated for American Society of Newspaper Editors 'Sunshine Week' national 'Local Hero' Award:
Howell's use of Washington's Public Records Law forced disclosure of shocking misdeeds that led to the resignation of former Skamania County Auditor Michael J. Garvison

SEATTLE, WA. Gloria Howell of Stevenson, Skamania County, Washington, has been nominated for the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Sunshine Week "Local Hero" Award as a result of her dogged effort to shine a bright light on corruption in the Skamania County Auditors' Office.

The shocking information revealed as a result of Howell's efforts to uncover the truth about conduct and the handling of public funds subsequently led to the resignation of former County Auditor Michael J. Garvison.

Howell was nominated for the Newspaper Editors' national award by the Washington Coalition for Open Government following a motion made by the Coalition's Vice President, former Seattle Times Executive Editor Mike Fancher. Howell's nomination was approved unanimously by the Coalition's Board of Directors.

Together with former Skamania County Prosecutor Brad Anderson, Howell was honored by the Washington Coalition for Open Government with its Key Award last July.

On May 18th Gloria Howell will be one of the presenters at an Open Government Forum at the Stevenson Library. The Forum, from 5:30 - 7:30 p.m., will also feature attorney Greg Overstreet (who served as Special Assistant Washington Attorney General for Government Accountability from 2005-2007), State Archivist Jerry Handfield, former Skamania County Prosecutor Brad Andersen and the President of the Washington Coalition for Open Government, Toby Nixon.

In its nomination of Howell for the Sunshine Week's national Local Hero award, the Washington Coalition for Open Government noted that Howell's concerns about irregularities in ballot processing and use of public funds in the Auditor's Office prompted Gloria Howell to seek the truth using Washington's Public Records law.

"Howell sought documents regarding Garvison's expenses accounts, reimbursements, purchases, travel, cell phone records, credit card expenses and other documents. She obtained assistance from Bradley Anderson who had grown up with Howell's daughters and later served eight years as County Prosecutor before entering private law practice.

"After repeated unsuccessful attempts to obtain the records, Howell had Anderson file litigation to force the issue. Shortly thereafter the Court entered a Stipulated Order requiring production of the requested documents and awarding Howell \$4,500 under the Public Records Act." The Court also imposed a \$1,000 fine on the Auditor for his violation of the state's Public Records law.

Howell and Anderson then met with the Skamania County Sheriff's Office, provided copies of the documents, and explained their concerns about the conduct that was disclosed and documented in the public records.

A 27-page report of investigation by the Sheriff's Office, and referrals to the Washington State Auditor and Washington State Attorney General followed.

According to the Coalition, Gloria Howell "focused a bright light on the public corruption as she doggedly pursued the truth. Press coverage was consistent and pointed, especially by The Skamania County Pioneer, The Columbian and KATU-TV. Community pressure mounted. Finally, Michael J. Garvison resigned."

The Sheriff's Report recommended review of the case for possible prosecution. The State Auditor reported Garvison "violated state law and County policy." The County Commissioners characterized Garvison's conduct as "squandering" of \$87,380 of public resources.

In November, a potential plea bargain to criminal charges was withdrawn as inadequate after a broad-section of community members and former elected officials galvanized and objected to the proposed plea agreement the Attorney General's office was anticipating recommending to the court. The issue of Garvison's accountability is now in the hands of Skamania County's newly elected Prosecutor, Adam Kick.

Toby Nixon, President of the Washington Coalition for Open Government, stated, "Washington's law is clear and strong. RCW 42.56.030 says the people of this state do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies that serve them. The people 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 maintain control over the instruments that they have created."

Elected officials and government staffers are not allowed to keep documents from the public for fear that their own wrong doing will be exposed, or that they will be embarrassed, said Nixon. And if they try, the law allows people to ask a judge to force disclosure, as well as impose penalties and attorney fees for failing to do the right thing from the very beginning.

"Moreover" said Nixon, "the provisions of the open government laws are to be liberally construed. Any exemptions for avoiding disclosure are to be narrowly construed. Those requirements in the law are there to make sure the public interest will be fully protected."

The situation in Skamania County provides a vivid reminder of why we need such strong laws to protect the public interest, Nixon said.

Sunshine Week 2011, which runs from March 13th -19th, is a national initiative to promote a dialogue about the importance of open government and freedom of information. Winners of the national Local Hero awards will be announced March 15th.

In announcing the 2011 Local Hero award program, Tim Franklin said, "As a society, we often associate the word 'hero' with movie stars and athletes, but in a self-governing democracy like ours, it takes the commitment and passion of average citizens doing extraordinary things to make government more open and more accountable."

"The ASNE Sunshine Week Local Heroes winners won't be seen on the big screen or on 'Sports Center' highlights. The largely unknown winners in this contest, however, will be heroes to anyone who pays taxes and votes in a local community - in other words, to every single resident who lives there," he said.

"Regular citizens have had a profound impact in their communities, whether it was changing how their elected officials operate or uncovering mishandling of taxpayer money. These are citizens who deserve our admiration, thanks and the title, 'Local Hero,' " said Franklin.

Franklin is co-chair of the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Freedom of Information Committee and the Director of the National Sports Journalism Center at the Indiana University School of Journalism in Bloomington where he holds the Louis A. Weil Jr. Endowed Chair.

The Washington Coalition for Open Government represents individuals and organizations intent on preserving and protecting Washington's Open Government Laws - Open Records and Open Meetings. Its mission is to represent the public in matters where open government issues are raised, are threatened, or deserves broader exposure. The Coalition conducts public workshops and forums around the state, involving the public, public officials, and the media in discussing government accessibility as provided in the various statutes that assure such access and accountability from public agencies in Washington State. For more information see: www.WashingtonCOG.org