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FROM: WASHINGTON COALITION FOR OPEN GOVERNMENT

TOPIC: SKAMANIA COUNTY WOMAN RECEIVES NATIONAL SUNSHINE WEEK AWARD FOR EXPOSING PUBLIC CORRUPTION

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Former school board member Gloria Howell of Stevenson, Skamania County, knew something smelled in the county auditor's office. So she began digging.

Her effective use of Washington's public records law revealed that the county auditor routinely and illegally charged taxpayers for thousands of dollars in unauthorized expenses, including \$15,000 for college tuition and \$39,000 for out-of-state travel. Howell's discoveries ultimately forced the auditor to resign last year. The county prosecutor has hired an outside prosecutor to determine whether criminal charges should be filed against the former auditor, J. Michael Garvison.

Today Howell was named the national winner of the annual "Local Heroes" award announced during Sunshine Week by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE).

The award highlights "the commitment and passion of average citizens doing extraordinary things to make government more open and more accountable," said Tim Franklin, co-chair of ASNE's Freedom of Information Committee.

Howell will receive an expenses-paid trip to San Diego in April to be honored at ASNE's annual convention.

Howell was nominated for the national award by the Washington Coalition for Open Government, which gave her its Key Award last year for exposing the auditor's blatant misconduct.

Howell shared that honor with former Skamania county prosecutor Brad Anderson of North Bonneville, now a private attorney who helped Howell file a lawsuit when the

auditor's office initially refused to provide expense records that Howell had requested. A subsequent audit found a total of \$87,000 in unauthorized spending by Garvison.

WCOG President Toby Nixon said Howell's successful exposure of official misconduct demonstrates that Washington's Public Records Act, approved by voters as a statewide initiative, "is clear and strong."

Quoting the preamble to the act, Nixon noted that the law explicitly declares that "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."

Sunshine Week is a nationwide observance promoted by ASNE and other groups to highlight the importance of transparency and accountability in government at all levels. The Washington Coalition for Open Government works to protect and help citizens and organizations use the state's Public Records Act and Open Public Meetings Act.

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