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### **Washington Coalition for Open Government Honors Activists, Journalists for Efforts Against SB 6617**

The Washington Coalition for Open Government honored activists and journalists at its Madison Andersen Bunting Awards event Sept. 21 in Seattle, recognizing the successful effort to prevent the state legislature from exempting itself from access laws.

Retired Seattle Times executive editor Mike Fancher received the James Andersen Award for his service in furthering the work of the Coalition, including 12 years on the board. Associated Press reporter Rachel La Corte, who covers the legislature, was presented the Kenneth F. Bunting Award, which recognizes journalistic work advancing government access. Also recognized were the media organizations across the state – including numerous WNPA members – who raised awareness of the ill-conceived SB 6617 introduced last session, which would have exempted the legislature from the state’s Public Records Act.

Receiving the James Madison Award, which honors exemplary action for the cause of open government, were those who helped defeat that legislation: the people of the state of Washington, who deluged their legislators and the governor’s office with more than 20,000 calls and emails opposing the bill.

“The Coalition very much appreciates the efforts of everyone who had a part in getting the word out about Senate Bill 6617. It was an amazing demonstration of what we can accomplish when we work together,” said WCOG President Toby Nixon, after reviewing the action that led to the governor’s last-minute veto.

Three WCOG members represented those citizen activists who fought SB 6617, receiving WCOG’s Madison Award. The honor goes annually to an individual or organization whose commitment to the cause of open government is demonstrated through exemplary words or deeds.

Pam Wascher of Redmond, Charles Lie of Gold Bar and Gordon Padgett of Vancouver accepted the Madison Award on behalf of the people of Washington.

Nixon also noted that the people’s opposition to SB 6617 reflected the recurring demand for government accountability. The state constitution notes that “political power is inherent in the people,” and the Public Records Act was adopted in 1972 by a ballot initiative.

“I hope that this incident has truly awakened The People of Washington to the continuing threat to access to information on what their government is doing, and filled them with a continuing terrible resolve to maintain transparency and accountability, so that the principles embodied in Initiative 276 can be maintained and strengthened,” he said.

Wascher, speaking for the trio who represented the people of the state, thanked the WCOG officers who had helped rally the effort, including Nixon, Michele Earl-Hubbard and Ed Clark.

She also related an encouraging response from a legislator she lobbied regarding 6617 and access issues in general; he introduced an alternate bill that would make legislative records, including member calendars, public. Wascher said that Mike Pellicciotti (D-Federal Way) wrote to her, "The legislature are not special people. Should be required among government agencies to release their records."

### **Journalist Fancher Honored for WCOG Work**

Fancher, who retired from The Times in 2008 after 40 years in journalism, served recently as interim chair of the George S. Turnbull/Agora Journalism Center in Portland, part of the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. He is currently WCOG historian, and has also served as secretary, vice president and on numerous committees. The Andersen Award recognizes the former chief justice of the state supreme court and a founder of WCOG. As WCOG President Toby Nixon put it, "It's our volunteer of the year award," recognizing extraordinary effort to advance the work of the Coalition.

"For the past 12 years, he has been a calm presence and a source of wise council based on his experience and his deep commitment to his community and to civic life," said 2016 Andersen award winner Michele Earl-Hubbard, WNPA media attorney who presented the award to Fancher. "He has kept us on the right track and kept us moving forward, reminding us of the importance of this organization."

Fancher recalled two recent WCOG actions as exemplifying the work of the Coalition.

He went to Okanogan to present a Key Award to an ad hoc group of citizen journalists who had begun attending council meetings, taking notes – and later videos – to post online, and keep an eye on government activity. "It's this wonderful amplification of what journalists try to do, and there aren't enough journalists to do this," Fancher said. "It is an inspiring example of citizens doing the hard work of keeping government open."

He also referenced a recent meeting with officials and civic leaders from Malaysia had helped him crystalize WCOG's strengths. He told them the story of WCOG's origin by a voter initiative, and about the recent rally against SB 6617. They were impressed with the concept of a coalition, Fancher said. "You look around," he said, "members represent all kinds of points of view, but we come together in the common cause of government openness and transparency."

"I like to think of this this as a combo of truth and trust," he added. "If you're not in the common pursuit of truth, you're not going to have trust. And if you don't have some level of trust, you're not going to agree on what's true."

### **Bunting Award Goes to La Corte of AP**

La Corte, who has reported for the Associated Press in Olympia for 21 years, received the Kenneth F. Bunting Award. Named for a former P-I editor and fierce transparency advocate, the award recognizes journalistic work that uses, advances or educates about the state's access laws. La Corte has covered legislative attempts to exclude itself from the Public Records Act, including the recent SB 6617.

The legislature "routinely denied requests for records," Nixon said. "They basically dared the people to sue them and prove them wrong. Rachel La Corte decided to take that dare." She urged her management to file a suit, joined by numerous Washington media organizations, challenging the legislature's assertion that it is exempt.

"I can't imagine how many people in our state haven't even thought about public records until the avalanche of activity last session," said 2017 Bunting Award winner Susanna Frame of KING-TV, who presented the 2018 award to La Corte.

La Corte credits fellow media and residents for the “very public debate on the importance of government transparency and accountability.”

She thanked the other media organizations who have joined in the AP’s lawsuit and Earl-Hubbard, who is leading it. The state Supreme Court has agreed to hear it.

“The public proved they are every bit as interested in access to records as we are,” she said. “We all have a part to play in shining a light on government.”

Sharing the 2018 Bunting Award for their part in urging the veto are media organizations throughout the state. Thirteen daily newspapers ran front-page editorials on Feb. 27 urging Gov. Inslee to veto SB 6617, and encouraging Washingtonians to contact with their concern. Several television stations ran editorial commentary pushing the same, and most of the state’s weekly newspapers, including at least two college papers, plus online news sites ran opinion pieces opposing SB 6617.

WCOG was founded in 2002 by a group of individuals representing organizations with a broad spectrum of opinions and interests but all dedicated to the principles of strengthening the state’s open government laws and protecting the public’s access to government at all levels. WCOG stands for the principle that transparency and public participation are essential building blocks of good government.

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