



The Chronicle in Chehalis recognized for defending transparency

Chehalis, WA-----The Washington Coalition for Open Government has presented reporter Natalie Johnson and Columnist Brittany Voie, both of The Chronicle, with Key Awards for work exposing violations of the state’s transparency laws by the Lewis County Commission. The state’s Open Public Meetings Act requires the public be given 24 hours advance notice whenever a quorum of a public body meets, with limited exceptions for extreme emergencies. In order to circumvent that requirement, a previous Commission declared itself to be in public session everyday. Johnson’s writing and a subsequent lawsuit led to a change in policy.

“In 2009, a previous county commission approved a resolution stating that the board was in open session from 8am to 5pm every day while in the Lewis County Courthouse. The Commissioner’s reliance on the resolution was first reported by The Chronicle in March. In recent months, the commission and the Prosecutor’s Office have used that resolution to justify a quorum meeting in the building for a variety of reasons, including meetings with staff and a press conference, without additional notice.

According to the new policy, that will no longer be allowed.

The Commissioners also tried to use a prohibition in the OPMA dealing with “serial meetings” or meetings held through non-traditional means like emails, phone calls, and memos, to justify a claim that only one commissioner may respond to a reporter’s questions, Voie explained in her column.

A “serial meeting” is a series of communications through direct communication, writings, personal intermediaries, e-mail or other technological devices to develop a “collective concurrence” as to a proposed action by a governing body.

But, OPMA laws aren’t designed to prevent media or citizens from communicating with their elected officials — they’re designed to prevent elected officials from developing “collective concurrence” between each other (creating a de facto quorum), outside of public view (i.e., outside of a public, scheduled meeting), so as to prevent them from conducting public business in secret.

The work by these two talented journalists led to real change in the way the Lewis County Commission handled public meetings and has improved transparency in Lewis County. WCOG is pleased to honor these two journalists for their accomplishments on behalf of the residents of Lewis County. The award was presented on July 25th by WCOG Board member, Karen Peterson.