

Journalist shines light on retirement pensions, legislator-lobbyist relations using public records

Mike Baker and Austin Jenkins Key Award Profile
By Alisa Gramann

When Mike Baker filed public records requests in Olympia as a reporter for The Associated Press, he wasn't looking for shocking revelations so much as he was trying to understand the way government worked in and around Washington's capital.

His curiosity and questioning led to two investigative projects, each of which won a Key Award from the Washington Coalition for Open Government for their promotion of access to government activity, and ran in newspapers throughout the state.

One was a three-part series on pension and benefits collected by public employees in Washington.

Through his requests and an online database with retirement information, Mike found that some public employees, including firefighters and police officers, had disproportionate pensions and big benefits. Further, Mike found that some were collecting disability benefits despite being physically fit and working other jobs.

The story had many threads and Mike worked on it for nearly two years before it was published. The series began running on April 7, 2013, and Mike continued to follow the story until December.

He filed about 100 public records requests and got mixed responses, he said.

Some organizations wouldn't provide electronic copies of documents, others seemed to be improperly withholding documents and others were slow to respond. Some, especially in smaller cities and counties, simply didn't understand public records law, Mike said.

"That's a big hurdle," he said.

Mike took the time to explain the relevant aspects of the law to different agency officials in order to get the records he needed, despite the project being a "huge time drain."

Balancing a long-term project with the daily news cycle can be tough, but as his public records requests were answered new nuggets of information and new threads of the story would appear, revitalizing it and motivating Mike to keep pushing on, he said.

"The value of open records law in telling that story was immeasurable," he said.

David Seago, a WCOG board member and former editor at The News Tribune in Tacoma, endorsed Mike for a Key Award, stating in his nomination that Mike deserved recognition not only for the reporting that went into his story, but for educating many public officials and government offices on the nuances of public records law.

Later, when Mike began digging into lobbyist-legislator relationships along with Northwest Public Radio reporter Austin Jenkins, the duo found a whole new challenge to accessing public records.

Curiosity prompted Mike to learn how often lobbyists were taking legislators out for meals, and all the information was available online in the Public Disclosure Commission's database, eliminating the need for public records requests.

But the catch was that the database was not sortable. It provided simply a monthly report filed by each lobbyist stating who they dined with and how much they spent.

To know how often a certain legislator accepted free meals, a person would have to sift through every monthly report for every lobbyist, searching for the legislator's name.

"We didn't even do every lobbyist, and we took three weeks," Mike said.

A person could easily spend months trying to find specific information. Mike and Austin committed three weeks to telling a story not simply about legislators accepting free meals, but about the shabby state of these public records.

"I think folks in Olympia hide behind the fact that it is public," he said. "Even though it is public, it is essentially useless for most people."

In response to Mike's story, "Olympia lobbyists pamper lawmakers with free meals," which ran in The Seattle Times and on news wires across the Northwest in late May 2013, some lawmakers in Olympia realized an issue of inaccuracy in the reporting system, he said. For example, some officials are reported as having dined with lobbyists even though all they ordered was a glass of water.

State Rep. Jim Moeller (D-Vancouver) and others have become advocates for transparency in this area and are pushing for legislation to achieve it, Mike said.

"It's nice to see lawmakers interested in transparency," Mike said.

Kathy Sakahara nominated both Mike and Austin for Key Award in recognition of their reports on lobbyists and meals when the lobbyist for the League of Women Voters shared it with her. Kathy serves as a board member for the league, as well as a board member for WCOG.

The article focused on the money, but Kathy was struck by the fact that it took three weeks for Mike and Austin to sift through records of 50 lobbyists.

"That struck me as inconsistent with the Public Records Act," she said.

Mike's work keeps the public informed, something Kathy thinks is important to continue.

"He's a good example of a true journalist," she said.

Though Mike doesn't advocate making records requests willy-nilly, he encourages people to make requests on topics they are interested in. Open record laws aren't in place only so reporters can find specific documents; they exist so the public can educate themselves on issues, he said.

In this way, open government and public records aren't issues of interest only to journalists, but something the public at large should have a stake in. Too many people or groups want to limit open government, Mike said.

<http://www.columbian.com/news/2013/apr/07/late-pay-raises-are-one-way-to-fatten-workers-stat/> (April 7, 2013 AP story by Mike Baker)

<http://seattletimes.com/text/2021078653.html> (May 2013 Times story by Mike Baker)