

NEWS RELEASE

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Washington Coalition for Open Government

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JOURNALISTS MIKE BAKER AND AUSTIN JENKINS WIN KEY AWARDS FROM THE WASHINGTON COALITION FOR OPEN GOVERNMENT

Seattle Times reporter Mike Baker and Northwest Public Radio reporter Austin Jenkins have received Key Awards from the Washington Coalition for Open Government for highlighting the amount of free meals state legislators receive from lobbyists.

As a result of their three-week reporting project earlier this year, the state Legislative Ethics Board is debating proposed limits on the number of free meals lawmakers can accept from lobbyists.

Baker, who was working for The Associated Press at the time, and Jenkins were recently presented the awards at their respective workplaces. Key Awards honor individuals or organizations that take specific actions to advance the cause of open government in Washington.

Aside from prompting public scrutiny of the free-meals issue in Olympia, the collaboration between Baker and Jenkins also highlighted the need to modernize the method of reporting lobbyist expenditures on free meals, WCOG President Toby Nixon noted.

Because lobbyist expenditures are reported on paper forms and are often inaccurate and confusing, it took three weeks of scouring thousands of pages of reports for Baker and Jenkins compile their report. Campaign contributions, by contrast, are reported in electronic format and stored in searchable databases available to the public.

“The discussion of limits on free meals is good,” Nixon said, “but it’s even more important to improve the method of disclosure. Let the people find out quickly and easily via electronic means when someone is providing their legislator a gift of a free meal that could be of substantial value and influence their position on matters of public interest.”

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.

Membership is open to the public. For more information contact WCOG at 6351 Seaview Avenue NW, Seattle, WA 98107-2664, on the web at www.washingtoncog.org, or call (206) 782-0393.

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