

NEWS RELEASE

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WASHINGTON COALITION FOR OPEN GOVERNMENT HONORS OKANOGAN COUNTY WATCH

The Washington Coalition for Open Government presented Okanogan County Watch with a Key Award for advocacy of open government in Okanogan County. The award was presented at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday, April 10th, at the commissioners' hearing room in Okanogan.

The Washington Coalition for Open Government (WCOG) is an independent non-partisan non-profit organization, with membership open to the public. The Coalition believes transparency and public participation are building blocks of good government. The Key Award is given to individuals or organizations that have done something notable for the cause of open government in Washington State.

Okanogan County Watch (OCW), is a countywide group of volunteers who post notes and occasional videos of County Commissioner meetings on its website, www.countywatch.org. The volunteers also send e-mails of commissioners' agendas and meeting summaries to interested parties. These volunteers pay their own expenses, including mileage for countywide trips of up to 50 miles one-way.

Mike Fancher, WCOG board member and retired Seattle Times executive editor, said, "OCW is an inspiring example of citizens doing the hard work of keeping government open and accountable. People have the right to access government information and there is no better defender of that right than the people themselves."

In early 2014, one individual, Isabelle Spohn of Twisp, began e-mailing notes of Commissioners' weekly Planning Updates regarding land use decisions, due to delayed posting of minutes and agendas on the county website.

By October 25, 2015, the group had expanded coverage to all Commissioners' proceedings. Represent Okanogan County (ROC), a group formed to address lack of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of a then-existing board of Commissioners, began timely postings of these notes on its website. Ongoing Commissioners' discussions of possible relocation of juvenile offenders to Spokane were immediately revealed, causing countywide outcry and publicized meetings.

By mid-2017, eighteen volunteers on a varied schedule had participated and five consistently scheduled note takers had emerged to cover most proceedings. By late January, 2018, this regular group had launched its own website and Facebook page as Okanogan County Watch, now including lists of citizen representatives to boards and advisory groups.

In addition to Spohn, the existing team includes note takers are George Thornton (Oroville) Gina McCoy and Emily Sisson (Winthrop), Katie Haven (webmaster, Methow) with support staff Rick Gillespie (retiring, Chesaw), and Jan Young (Pine Forest.)

With the election of two new Commissioners for 2017 through 2020, the ongoing efforts of the County Clerk, and the work of OCW, significant improvements in governmental transparency are evident. They include more timely posting of minutes and agendas, quick acknowledgment of public records requests, dramatic decrease in executive sessions, inclusion of the public in Commissioners' discussions, and occasional videos (which are beyond the county's financial ability to produce and archive.)

OCW states: "We are honored to receive the Key award and to join an impressive list of citizens of all political persuasions who have been willing to act in defense of RCW 42.30.10: *"The people of this state do not yield their sovereignty to the agencies which serve them. The people, in delegating authority, 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."*

WCOG was founded in 2002 by a group of individuals representing organizations with a broad spectrum of opinions and backgrounds, all dedicated to the principles of strengthening the state's open government laws and protecting the public's access to government at all levels.

The Key Award was originated in 2007. On average, fewer than 10 have been presented each year. Nominations for Key Awards can be made at any time. A nomination form is on the WCOG website (<http://washingtoncog.org/awards/key-award/>). Selection of award winners is made by vote of the WCOG Board of Directors.

For more information, contact Washington Coalition for Open Government, 6351 Seaview Avenue NW, Seattle, WA 98107-2664 or on the web at www.washingtoncog.org or call (206) 782-0393.