



Washington Coalition *for* Open Government

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Press Release

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SEATTLE – The Washington Coalition for Open Government on Wednesday protested Gov. Jay Inslee’s appointment of a San Juan County Council member to the state Sunshine Committee, calling the appointment at odds with the committee’s mission.

In a letter to Inslee, the coalition urged the governor to correct the error and ask his appointee, San Juan County Council Member Jamie Stephens, to withdraw from the Sunshine Committee.

“Your recent appointment of Jamie Stephens to the Sunshine Committee is astonishingly out of step with the principles and citizen expectations surrounding its work,” the coalition told the governor in a letter signed by WCOG President Mike Fancher.

The state Legislature created the Sunshine Committee in 2007 to review the hundreds of exemptions to the state Public Records Act and recommend exemptions for repeal or revision.

Lawmakers designated four seats on the Sunshine Committee for “members of the public.” The state Legislature intended the public members to be independent voices for citizens on the panel, not members of government.

Unfortunately, the newest “public” representative is Stephens, an elected member of the San Juan County Council. He is also San Juan County’s public records officer, putting him in the position of being the gatekeeper for his own accountability to the public.

San Juan County has a poor transparency track record. It has resisted providing the fullest assistance to requesters. When the county forced requesters to go through another layer of administrative review of its own making, the state Supreme Court in 2019 struck it down.

Stephens’ appointment is also troubling because for more than a year the Washington State Association of Broadcasters has sought a seat on the Sunshine Committee for news broadcasters. We are in complete agreement with the broadcasters association; millions of Washington residents are informed by newscasts, and the industry needs a vote on the Sunshine Committee.

In forming the Sunshine Committee, lawmakers sought a balanced panel in which the public's voice would be heard and considered. The governor's appointment of Jamie Stephens ignores that principle.

The Washington Coalition for Open Government is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded in 2002. We are an independent, broad-based advocate for public records, open meetings and informed citizens.

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