

Open Government meeting

The North Carolina Open Government Coalition met on Wednesday, August 31, 2005, at WRAL-TV in Raleigh.

New board members Judy Burke and Rick Thames were in attendance, as well as Jordy Whichard, Pauletta Brown Bracy, Ross Holt, Joan Siefert Rose, Jon Buchan, Jim Hefner, Fran Barrows, Melanie Sill, Hugh Stevens and Sue Wilson.

The board accepted the resignation of Mary Klenz.

New officers selected were Melanie Sill, president; Jim Hefner, vice president; Jordy Whichard, treasurer; and Sue Wilson, secretary.

Jordy Whichard gave the board a financial update, and reported on gifts from the Reynolds Foundation and WTVD television in Durham.

The board discussed whether the NCOGC needs an audit. The organization files a 990 form with the IRS, which has detailed financial information. It was decided that a one-page report on the organization's first year would serve to create the foundation for accountability to the charter members. Ms. Sill said she would do that as part of a letter to the membership in seeking dues for 2006.

The board then discussed a membership structure for 2006 and the future.

This was a wide-ranging discussion, which touched on memberships, separating memberships from donations, providing something of value for the dues and communicating the organization's activities so members will feel part of the work and so the public will understand that the organization works for its interests.

The NCOGC's mission to educate was discussed, and Ms. Sill said the

organization will take positions on specific issues. She said that while the NC Press Association works on behalf of media organizations, the NCOGC goes beyond that to offer a broader perspective, such as the importance of open government and public records for libraries and lawyers.

Mr. Holt suggested the coalition come up with a marketing campaign to drive people to the Web site. It was also suggested that the site offer "how to" information on getting information from government.

The board then discussed dues levels for various levels of memberships for the participating organizations. Sue Wilson was asked to revise the membership proposal and seek to get this completed prior to the next board meeting.

The board discussed holding an annual event to encourage public participation as part of the effort to educate people about how government is supposed to work.

The conversation turned to fundraising, and Mr. Barrows discussed the budgets of the various organizations around the United States. He said all reported that having an executive director - either fulltime or part-time - is the greatest expense. He said that person gives the group a public face and voice and works to raise its profile. Effective open government groups also provide free educational programs and printed material to the general public, scholarships, offer effective publications for donors and sometimes, in cooperation with other groups, are involved in litigation.

The group discussed holding fundraising events as opposed to relying only on dues to raise money. Some states do this with dinners to honor someone and selling table sponsorships. Others make money selling resource material and others with FOI seminars. Other funds are available from various foundations. Mr. Barrows said he thought \$30,000 was a reasonable goal for the organization at this time. He said a long-term goal would be to cultivate a large donor and/or develop a relationship with a university.

Some challenges to fundraising are the difficulties facing the newspaper industry. Most organizations on firm footings now began 10 or 20 years ago when business was in better shape. It was suggested that events are better than soliciting funds from companies.

The board also discussed creation of an annual First Amendment award, similar to the Lassiter Award presented by the NC Press Association. It

was discussed that such an award should not go to an active member of a newspaper organization. The board also discussed whether the NCPA would allow that dinner to become a fundraiser for the NCOGC since it is not, at present, a fundraiser for NCPA.

Ms. Bracey offered to work on a strategic plan for the organization.

Ms. Sill discussed opportunities to promote the organization, including co-sponsoring the Freedom Sings event in October and offering representatives to speak at seminars for elected officials. The board recommended the group participate in League of Municipalities seminars.

The board agreed to plan a seminar in 2006 similar to the one-day event held in Charlotte in 2005.

The board agreed to pursue finding enough revenue to hire someone on a part-time basis to work as part-time director on a contract basis. Jim Hefner was asked to draft a job description for the short-term position.