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Virginia Coalition for Open Government bestows open government awards in citizen, media and government categories

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Carol Lindstrom is this year's recipient of the Virginia Coalition for Open Government's Laurence E. Richardson award for individual citizen contributions to open government.

The award honors the memory of a longtime Charlottesville broadcaster and VCOG founding director and will be presented the first day of VCOG's annual conference, Oct. 15, at the Stonewall Jackson Hotel in Staunton.

Because the Christiansburg town government had no Web site, Lindstrom, with no prior technical experience, created one herself. Spending more than \$1,000 of her own money, she obtained documents through FOIA, scanned them digitally and posted them to her Web site. Even after the town eventually created its own Web site, Lindstrom continued to post documents that were not available on that site, as well as audio and video recordings of town council, planning commission and other committee meetings.

A passionate advocate for open government on her blog and through her work with the League of Women Voters of Montgomery County, Lindstrom also researched and composed: "Citizen Initiative for Transparency: Public Documents Audit," which includes a companion Web site to collect FOIA resources for citizens.

VCOG's 2009 FOI award for media will go to Mike Owens of *Bristol Herald-Courier* for his series of articles revealing a kickback scheme between an Abingdon magistrate judge and his bail bondsman-father.

Documents Owens obtained through FOIA showed that Magistrate John C. "Tiny" Mullins III used a fellow magistrate's electronic computer signature to falsify records releasing three defendants from jail; all three defendants had hired Mullins' father J.C. Mullins Jr. as their bondsman.

Owens' investigation prompted State Police to investigate Mullins, who was also fired from his position by the Virginia Supreme Court's Office of the Executive Secretary nearly three weeks after fielding a request for documents related to the scheme.

Fairfax County and the City of Alexandria will share VCOG's FOI award for government.

Facing a \$650 million revenue shortfall for its 2010 fiscal year budget, Fairfax County waged an all-out public engagement blitz to get input on where to make cuts. The county held community dialogue sessions; brownbag lunch sessions; and integrated voice response technology for public questions, comments and suggestions. An extensive media campaign included news releases, newspaper advertisements, 1,900 fliers to school and community groups, 200 posters in county and school facilities, video segments

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broadcasted on the county's television station, and information and videos posted on the county's RSS feeds, and its Facebook and YouTube sites.

The county was also recently recognized by the Center for Digital Government for having the top government Web portal for a county.

The City of Alexandria is being recognized for its response to Norfolk Southern Railroad's proposal to transfer ethanol from train to tanker cars ("transloading") at an Alexandria facility. Faced with mounting citizen unease, the city first created a Web site dedicated solely to the transloading, then set out to compile the thousands of electronic communications by city staff about the issue and created a software program allowing connected messages to be read together in date and time order. Related documents were also linked to and integrated into the online archive.

The city supplemented its efforts with several public meetings, a community workshop, and an interactive emergency exercise.

The Virginia Coalition for Open Government is a nonprofit alliance formed to promote expanded access to government records, meetings and other proceedings at the state and local level. For more information about the award winners, the conference, or the coalition, please contact Megan Rhyne at vcog@opengovva.org or 540-353-8264.

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