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2011 FOI awards recognize Fairfax parent, The Roanoke Times, and two state legislators

Virginia Coalition for Open Government to present its annual awards at conference, Oct. 29, at historic Monticello

Jill DeMello Hill of Fairfax is this year's winner 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 a VCOG founding director and will be presented Saturday, Oct. 29, at VCOG's annual conference at Thomas Jefferson's historic home of Monticello in Charlottesville.

When the county school board made the surprise decision to close an area elementary school, Hill and many other concerned parents filed FOIA requests looking for answers. Some FOIAs were answered, others were not, and some showed emails being exchanged at a rate that resembled an electronic meeting. Hill's pursuit of answers led some board members to publicly complain to *The Washington Post* about the fact that their emails were public records. Hill filed suit against the county, and while the judge ruled the emails were not an electronic meeting, the judge did find that some of the withheld records should have been disclosed, and some of FOIA's public meeting provisions had been violated. Hill's efforts demonstrated the power of citizens using FOIA to hold government accountable.

VCOG's 2010 award for media will go to *The Roanoke Times*. Acting on a tip in 2008 that the Radford city spokeswoman had filed a FOIA request for records related to a harassment complaint, the paper filed its own FOIA request for the employee's request. The paper took the city to court when the city disclosed only a redacted version of the request. In late 2009, a circuit court judge sided with the paper. The city appealed to the Virginia Supreme Court, but then announced in October 2010 that it was dropping the case. The city also agreed to pay the paper's attorneys' fees. In a time when many press outlets have cut funding for FOIA litigation, *The Roanoke Times* reminded VCOG's awards committee of why enforcing rights under the law are still so important.

Dels. Jim LeMunyon (R-Chantilly) and Mark Keam (D-Vienna) are this year's co-winners of the government award. As first-year delegates in 2010, the Northern Virginia duo banded together to present a bill that would put legislators' voting histories online and make them searchable. The measure made it through the House unanimously before being killed in the Senate. The pair reintroduced the bill in 2011 and began an aggressive campaign to enlist support across a broad spectrum of interest groups and political ideologies. Wary, though, of a repeat in the Senate, the bill was converted into a House resolution and passed unanimously. The resolution directs the House clerk's office to have the system up and running by 2012. The delegates' bipartisan efforts demonstrated the best of coalition building in support of open government.

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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