

## Open government supported

By The Associated Press

CHEYENNE - The newly formed Wyoming Coalition for Open Government will work to promote and defend transparency in Wyoming government while educating citizens about the value and use of the state's open-government laws, founders of the group said.

Directors of the coalition, known as WCOG, will launch the new group at a press conference Thursday at the Wyoming state Capitol. The coalition will issue its first award for government openness, called the Champion of the First Amendment Award, and its first award for an entity it believes has stymied openness, called the Black Hole Award.

The coalition, modeled after similar groups in other states, is made up of organizations and individuals who share an interest in defending public access to government, said Jim Angell, a founder of the coalition and director of the Wyoming Press Association.

Member groups include the Wyoming Press Association, the League of Women Voters, the Equality State Policy Center, the Wyoming Tribune Eagle, the Casper Star-Tribune and The Associated Press, he said.

"We all share these interests, and so we figured it would be good to pool our efforts while trying to improve government access," Angell said.

Memberships in the coalition, which has applied to become a nonprofit, are available to individuals and groups for annual dues ranging from \$25 for students to \$250 for large newspapers and broadcasters, or more for interested donors.

Wyoming's main open-government laws ensure the public's access to records produced or received by Wyoming governmental entities and to meetings held by governmental entities.

One of the group's goals will be to foster public understanding of the importance of open government, said D. Reed Eckhardt, executive editor of the Wyoming Tribune Eagle and the coalition's acting president.

"Really, it's about educating people to use their government," Eckhardt said. "One of our concerns is it always ends up being perceived by the public as a press issue because the Press Association is involved or the newspaper is involved. It's our hope that residents will come to realize that it's bigger than that. The issues affect more than just a newspaper or just a TV station."

To promote public understanding of open-government laws, the group is tentatively planning a series of seminars around the state this spring during Sunshine Week, a national initiative to emphasize the importance of open government and freedom of information.

Directors said the Wyoming group will also lobby for open-government laws and initiate or assist in legal proceedings when necessary.

Angell said one matter the coalition may be interested in pursuing during the ongoing legislative session is Senate File 25, related to the release of information about sex assault cases. The bill would make minor changes to a law that restricts the release of information that would identify the victims of sexual assault.

Angell said he'd like to see the bill amended to discourage judges from closing entire case files to the public in their effort to prevent identification of the victim.

"It's gone so far as to have entire cases closed, so the perpetrator is never known," Angell said. "We think that's going perhaps too far to protect the ID of the victim."