



MINNESOTA COALITION ON GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

MNCOGI announces winners for the 2014 John R. Finnegan FOI Award

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A dogged champion for the public's right to know about public expenditures and two pioneers of Minnesota's open records law are this year's recipients of the annual John R. Finnegan Freedom of Information Award by the Minnesota Coalition on Government Information.

Marshall Helmberger, publisher of Timberjay Newspapers in Tower-Soudan, Ely and Cook-Orr, wanted to know why there were so many cost adjustments for a St. Louis County school district construction project. When neither the district nor the subcontractor responded sufficiently with requests through the Minnesota Data Practices Act, Helmberger mounted a legal challenge that reached the Minnesota Supreme Court. His efforts highlighted a gap in state law that legislators are working to close. Advocates of open government now know to keep a watchful eye on this process.

"Private companies should know and expect that when they are accepting the public's money that citizens have a right to know how and why that money is being spent," said MNCOGI Chair Gary Hill. "We applaud Mr. Helmberger for pursuing this information and expect the legislature will finish the job he began and fix the law."

MNCOGI also recognizes Robert Shaw and Rodgers Adams with special Lifetime Achievement Awards for their role in defining the policy that now governs access to public documents and records. Shaw is the former executive director for the Minnesota Newspaper Association. Adams performed a number of roles at the Star Tribune including implementing technology improvements. Both men worked with John Finnegan in shaping how the Data Practices Act was originally adopted and administered. In nominating them for the award, Don Gemberling, MNCOGI board member and former director of the state Information Policy Analysis Division, said Shaw and Adams "spent countless hours working with individual legislators, testifying at hearings, educating the public, editorializing, negotiating with government officials and drafting legislation all designed to give Minnesota the strongest possible freedom of information statute in the country."

The awards will be presented at MNCOGI's annual Freedom of Information Day event Friday March 14, noon to 1:00, at Minneapolis Central Library's Pohl Hall, 300 Nicollet Mall. The keynote speaker for the event is former Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Paul Anderson.

MNCOGI is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to the public's right to know, the promotion of public access to government information and transparency of government operations. MNCOGI Board members are John Borger; Helen Burke, Treasurer; Hal Davis, Duchesne Drew; Matt Ehling; Don Gemberling; Nancy Herther, Gary Hill, Chair; Art Hughes, Secretary; Jane Kirtley, Sharon Schmickle, James Shiffer and Amy Springer.

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