



Carmage Walls Commentary Prize

2019 Entry Form

Name of Author(s): Chris Cobler

Author's Title (editor, columnist, etc.): Editor, Publisher

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What is the subject/title of the entry? Port Politics

Date(s) of publication? May 27, 2018; June 3, 2018; July 28, 2018; Aug. 26, 2018; Oct. 20, 2018; March 31, 2019

Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Under

Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)

Dear Carmage Walls Commentary Prize judges,

Public officials regularly stomp on the Texas Open Meetings Act. Journalists fight this daily as best they can, but sometimes our watchdog role demands extraordinary efforts.

Victoria Advocate investigative reporter Jessica Priest discovered the Calhoun Port Authority violated the act by failing to notify the public in advance of hiring disgraced former Congressman Blake Farenthold as its lobbyist for \$160,000 a year. In response, the newspaper filed a lawsuit on behalf of the public to force the port board to go back and post the meeting properly.

To help the public understand this important law, the newspaper has published a series of editor columns and editorial board opinions about the lawsuit and about our subsequent investigative reporting on the port authority. This entry represents a selection of these opinions.

The Society of Professional Journalists' Legal Defense Fund has awarded the Advocate a small grant to help in its fight, but our family-owned newspaper has shouldered the bulk of the burden with the

important assistance of Victoria attorney John Griffin. The port has shown no sign of doing the right thing; instead, our subsequent reporting revealed the port has spent almost \$450,000 on the case's legal fees, appealing a lower-court ruling in favor of the newspaper.

The slow, expensive legal battle underscores the importance of a strong editorial voice. The results of the newspaper's work have been dramatic: The former congressman resigned his post in January amid the pressure, and four people – an unprecedented number -- filed to challenge the incumbent board chairman in the May election.

To right wrongs, newspapers often need the public's sustained outrage. For decades, the port board operated hidden from public view. Typically, this special district's elections were canceled because few knew about the board or even when the filing period was. The Calhoun Port Authority is no longer a secret.

Thank you for considering my entry and the newspaper's efforts for the Carmage Walls Commentary Prize.

Sincerely,

Chris Cobler

Editor and Publisher

