

Citizens join officials at transparency workshops

By **Jutta Biggerstaff**
Hi-Desert Star

YUCCA VALLEY — Local elected officials, as well as members of the public, learned the do's and don'ts of conducting a public meeting at a workshop Wednesday in the Yucca Room of the community center.

Like attentive students in a classroom, the group took notes, asked questions and paid close attention to instruction on the Ralph M. Brown Act and the California Public Records Act. Both measures concern public meetings and the need for openness and transparency in government.

The workshop, organized and presented by the Homestead Valley Community Council, was conducted by Terry Francke, founder of Californians Aware, or CalAware.

Francke and co-founder Richard McKee created the organization to improve government agencies' compliance with public forum laws and to increase the public's knowledge of them.

The morning session was devoted to the intricacies of the Brown Act, while the afternoon class involved the finer points of the California Public Records Act.

Members from many local agencies and legislative bodies attended the workshop, including Yucca Valley Town Council, Hi-Desert, Bighorn Desert-View and Joshua Basin water districts, Morongo Unified School District, Mojave Water Agency and

the Yucca Valley Planning Commission.

San Bernardino County was represented by 3rd District Supervisor Neil Derry, who opened the workshop and spoke of his efforts to improve transparency in county government. Alluding to recent county scandals, the supervisor announced initiatives that include a sunshine ordinance and an ethics committee.

Bighorn Desert-View Water Agency, an agency that has had its share of Brown Act problems in the past, was well-represented with four of five directors present.

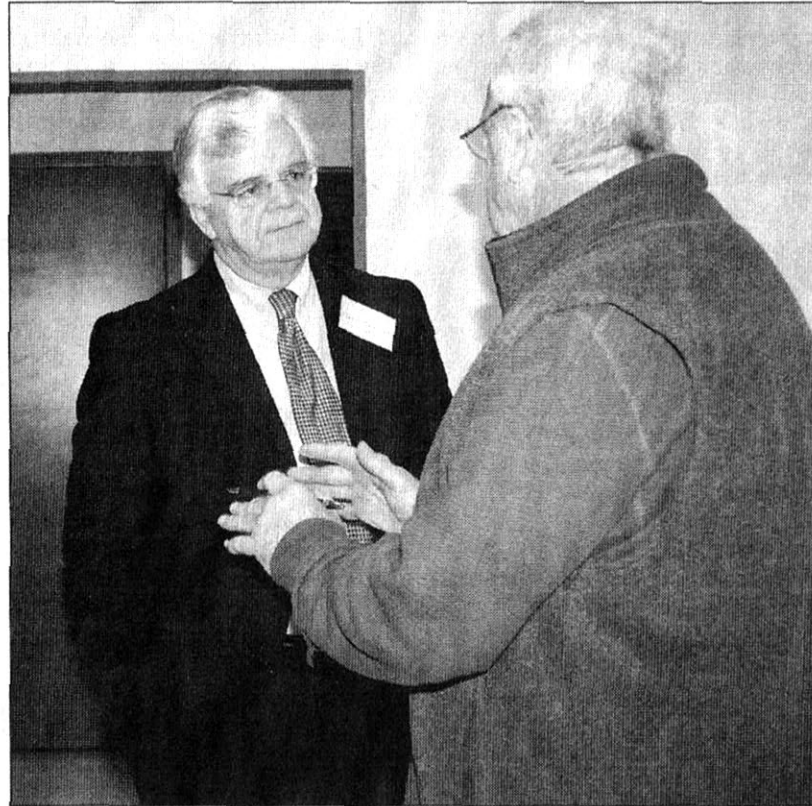
Dave Larson, newly installed on the board, said he believes compliance with the Brown Act is a key factor for elected officials.

"I'm a strong advocate of transparency," he said. "It's my view that increased transparency not will only help government officials conduct themselves in a more appropriate manner, but it's immensely important to the public to know what they are doing with their dollars."

Francke, a former newspaper editor who went on to law school, said before the Brown Act, many public meetings were conducted behind closed doors and with limited public access.

He feels strongly about open government.

"I've always been kind of nosy and irritated by secrets, particularly institutional secrets," he admitted with a wry smile.



JUTTA BIGGERSTAFF For the Hi-Desert Star

Terry Francke, founder of Californians Aware, or CalAware, left, discusses the Brown Act with Bighorn Desert-View director Larry Coulombe during a workshop that highlighted the Ralph M. Brown Act and the California Public Records Act.

Mike Reynolds, director of the Joshua Basin Water Agency, said as an elected official he thinks it is crucial to learn about the open meeting laws and to stay informed.

Margo Sturges, a member of the

Yucca Valley Planning Commission, said she found the workshop particularly helpful because of its detail and focus on specifics. She felt the workshop was valuable to her as a commissioner and as a private citi-



JUTTA BIGGERSTAFF For the Hi-Desert Star

Third District Supervisor Neil Derry speaks to the participants of an open government workshop Wednesday.

zen who is active in community affairs.

"We need to shed light on everything," she said. "I think the days of meetings being conducted in back rooms are in the past."