

Thurbert Baker is Weltner honoree
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GEORGIA FIRST AMENDMENT FOUNDATION

The people's lawyer

Ga. Attorney General Thurbert Baker is 2003
Charles Weltner Freedom of Information honoree

By Carolyn S. Carlson

Thurbert Baker put his Ga. Attorney General's office in the middle of the fight for open government in 1998, and it has been there with vigor and enthusiasm ever since.

For the overwhelming commitment that he and his Law Department have made to the sunshine laws, Baker is the Georgia First Amendment Foundation's choice to receive the 2003 Charles L. Weltner Freedom of Information Award.

It will be presented to him at during a banquet Saturday, Feb. 1 at the Swissotel in Atlanta. A reception begins at 6:30 p.m. and the dinner and program will start promptly at 7:30.

Baker took over the responsibility for the enforcement of Georgia's Open Meetings and Open Records Acts, 50-14-1 et seq and 50-18-70 et seq. It was a responsibility that Georgia DAs had not relished, for they brought a conviction about every 10 years.

Baker wrote the 1998 law that moved enforcement authority for Georgia's primary sunshine laws to the Law Department.

He clearly gained enforcement powers, yet the mild-mannered former state representative emphasized a gentler approach. He created an Open Government Mediation program modeled on one in use in Florida by then Attorney General Bob Butterworth. It has cleared hundreds of disputes around the state and by doing so, put open government in the spotlight as a visible aspect of Georgia public life.

In the process, the government's lawyer became the people's.

"I take this mission that I've chosen very seriously," Baker said. "I've always thought that in order for government to be good government, people had to have access to it."

Baker's Law Department has made a substantial commitment of its resources. Senior Assistant Attorney General Kathryn Allen is assigned to the Open Government Mediation program, according to a department spokesman. Daryl Robinson, Counsel to the Attorney General, handles all Open Records requests directed to the Law Department. Communications Director Russ Willard responds to questions about the Open Records and Open Meetings Acts from the media.

In addition, Jeff Milsteen, Chief Deputy Attorney General, and Dennis Dunn, Deputy Attorney General, are often involved in helping to

resolve open government issues.

At the department's web site, the fourth click is "Open Government." Going there, you see these words:

"How can the Attorney General's Office help in an Open Records or Open Meetings dispute?"

Baker is Georgia's 52nd attorney general but only the fourth since 1945, when Eugene Cook started a 20-year tenure. Arthur Bolton and Michael Bowers each served 16 years in office, preceding Baker.

The AG's office was established at the beginning of the Georgia state government, with its duties primarily involving the prosecution of criminals. Since the Civil War, the AG has been a constitutional officer, which means he is elected by the people, and has been the legal adviser to the governor and the other departments of state government.

Baker, 50, was appointed to the position by Gov. Zell Miller in 1997, when Bowers resigned to run for governor. Baker has twice been elected to four-year terms since. He starts his second full term in January.

Baker is the first African American, indeed the first minority, to serve as AG.

In 1998, he became one of the first two blacks in Georgia's history to win a non-judicial statewide election; Labor Commissioner Michael Thurmond won office in the same election. Robert Benham was elected to the Georgia Court of Appeals in 1988.

Georgia had black congressmen but no black senators or constitutional officers during the Reconstruction era.

Baker served in the Georgia House representing DeKalb County, from 1988 to 1999. He was Miller's assistant floor leader in 1991-92 and then floor leader in 1993-97. He played key roles in the enactment of Georgia's HOPE Scholarship program; the "Two Strikes and You're Out" legislation; the Crime Victims' Bill of Rights; and the 1997 reform of Georgia's welfare programs.

Baker is from Rocky Mount, N.C. He got his bachelor's from UNC-Chapel Hill and his law degree from Emory in 1979. He was in federal public private and managed his own private law firm before his appointment as AG.

He chaired the Violence Against Women Committee of the National Association of Attorneys General. He is a trustee of Ebenezer Baptist Church and a board member of the National Medical Society at Emory University; the DeKalb College Foundation; the Emory Law School Council; and Emory University's Board of Visitors.

Baker lives in Stone Mountain with his wife, Catherine, and their two daughters, Jocelyn and Chelsea.

Eason Jordan, CNN's chief news executive and president of newsgathering, received the first Weltner Freedom of Information Award in February 2002.

Carolyn S. Carlson , a doctoral candidate and adjunct professor of political science at Georgia State University, is a board member of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation.