

LOWER WISCONSIN RIVER VALLEY SENTINEL

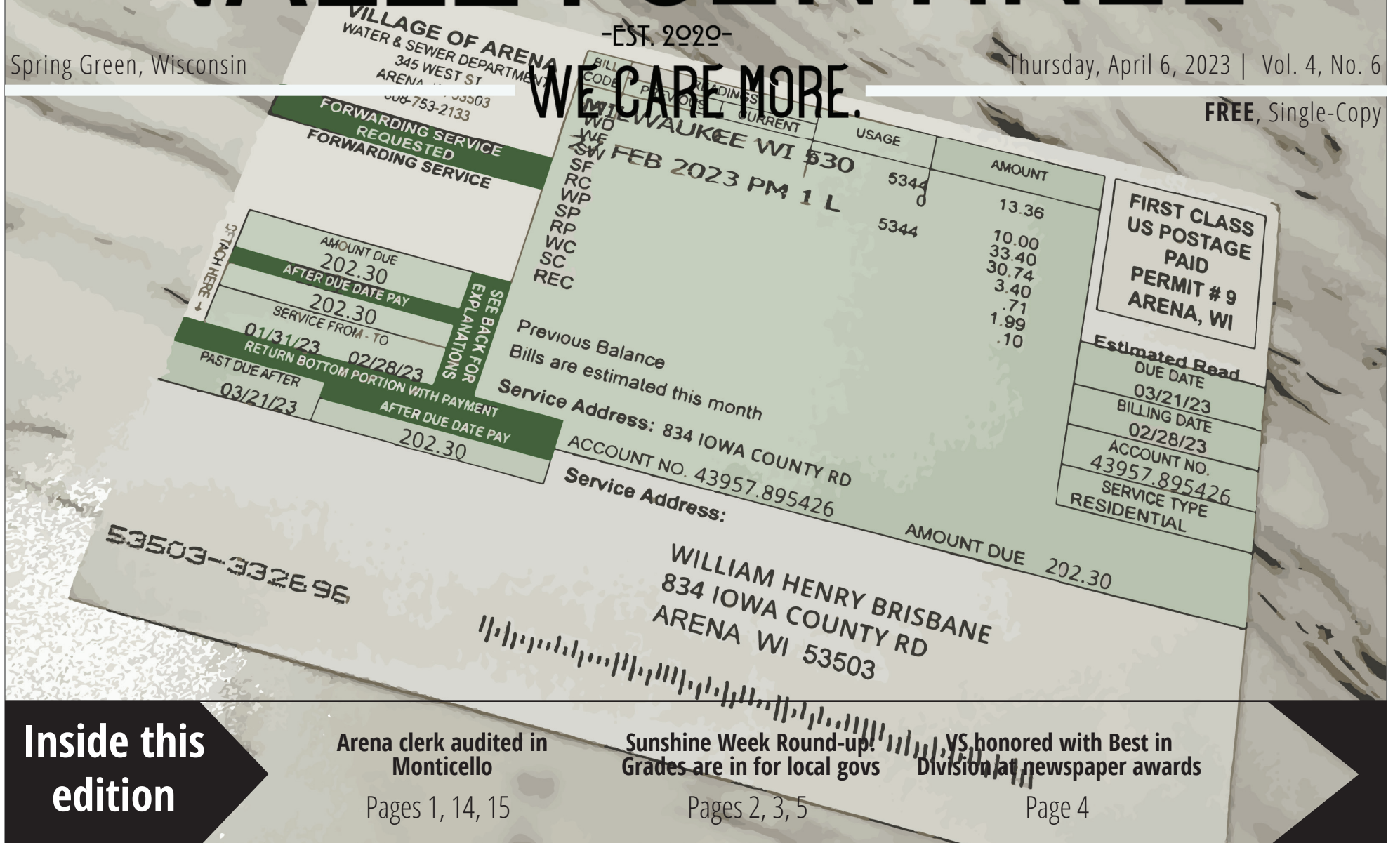
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Spring Green, Wisconsin

WE CARE MORE.

Thursday, April 6, 2023 | Vol. 4, No. 6

FREE, Single-Copy



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Arena board hears tenure of current Arena clerk audited in Monticello, discrepancies found in water bills

Audit reached no conclusions, but shows potentially large errors in water bills

Nicole Aimone, Editor-in-Chief

During public comment at last month's regular meeting of the Village of Arena Board of Trustees on March 7, board members were handed papers by former Village President Paul Pustina. Those papers contained an "Independent Accountant's Report" covering current Arena Village Clerk/Treasurer DeNean Naeger's tenure in Monticello. The report represents the findings of what Monticello Village Board minutes refer to as a forensic audit. Arena officials have stayed quiet since the meeting, but the current Monticello village president insists he saw no evidence of wrongdoing.

Naeger was clerk/treasurer for the Village of Monticello, in Green county, from November 4, 2013 to May 1, 2019, when the village board there voted to "separate employment" with Naeger. Two days later the Monticello board voted to conduct a forensic audit. During a meeting the next month, on June 19, the board formalized that decision by directing their village attorney, William Morgan, to contract with certified public accounting firm Johnson Block. Later that year Arena hired Naeger as their village clerk/treasurer.

Former Monticello Village President Leora Miller, under whose tenure the audit was started, did not respond to questions for this story. However, public records provided to Valley

Sentinel show that the Monticello Village Board had concerns including, but not limited to: financial controls, password security, failure to back up official emails to and from the clerk as done for those of all other village officers, a village certificate of deposit with Naeger as the only authorized official, village budget and tax payment discrepancies as well as water bill discrepancies.

Valley Sentinel has not yet received any records or responses that definitively indicate whether the village officials' concerns at the time were substantiated.

The report also notes that the procedures used were those agreed to by the Village's legal counsel and are the responsibility of the Village. The

accounting firm stated that it would not stand by those procedures as having been adequate "for the purpose for which the report has been requested or for any other purpose." Despite this disclaimer, the publicly ordered and funded report provides unique insight into the financial dealings of the Village while Naeger was clerk.

The report lists a release date of January 9, 2020, nearly seven months after Johnson Block was directed to conduct the audit. It's not clear when or if the full village board in Monticello was presented the audit, with public records indicating a village trustee and a community member both asking if the audit was complete at a November 16,

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Riverway board learns of road closure and navigational changes associated with Lone Rock bridge project

Mark Cupp, LWSRB Executive Director

The Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board (LWSRB) met in Muscodia on March 9 to conduct a regular monthly business meeting. Jake Gregerson of Kraemer North America and Barry Larson of HNTB Corporation provided new information on the Lone Rock bridge replacement project that included significant changes for both roadway and river users. Gregerson said STH 133 west of the current bridge will be closed for the summer months. For river users, the south channel will be closed for most of the summer use season with river traffic diverted to the channel on the north side of Long Island. A portage for paddlers will be available downstream of the bridge on Long Island in the south channel. The Otter Creek landing will remain open for boaters and as a destination for paddlers but is not recommended as a launch site for canoes and kayaks. Signage will be placed at

area boat landings alerting river users to the changes and south channel closure.

Mark Cupp, LWSRB Executive Director, noted the road closure and channel closure for the duration of the summer represent significant changes from the earlier plans that were presented to the board and public. However, the changes are within the design/build contract for the project and are necessary due to the unique challenges presented by location.

Cupp said, "The Department of Transportation (DOT) and Department of Natural Resources (DNR), as well as the contractor, have committed to educating river users to changes in navigation near the bridge construction zone through signage, regular updates via e-mail and other methods of outreach to the public. Safety for river users is paramount and I am recommending that people simply avoid the area of the Lone Rock bridge if at all possible and, especially when paddling, be prepared

to take the north channel at the head of Long Island instead of the traditional route toward the Otter Creek landing and south channel if continuing downstream toward Gotham."

The board also heard from Nate Fayram, DNR Ecologist, who provided information on activities related to the numerous State Natural Areas in the Riverway. Fayram described efforts to combat invasive species throughout the Riverway and highlighted work done by volunteers at sites such as the Blue River Sand Barrens and Mazomanie Oak Barrens. He said fire is an important tool in battling invasive species as well as restoring and maintaining native plant communities. Prescribed burns will occur if weather conditions are favorable. The board then approved extensions to several permits for management activities on state natural areas in the Riverway.

Cupp reported he had issued

extensions to The Nature Conservancy for management activities at The Spring Green Preserve and to Mike Finlay on behalf of the DNR for ongoing activities at the Mazomanie Unit. He also issued a timber harvest permit to Walter Koehnlein for a parcel in the Town of Orion, Richland County. The harvest area is not visible from the river during leaf-on conditions and will be conducted pursuant to a Managed Forest Law (MFL) plan.

FIELD TRIP ON APRIL 13

The Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board will host a field trip at sites in Crawford and Richland counties on Thursday, April 13, beginning at 1:00 p.m. The field trip is the second in a series under the new 2023 schedule of business meetings and educational opportunities adopted by the board at their January meeting. The field trip

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EDITOR'S COLUMN

I don't say this to be dramatic, but 2023 has been the SICKEST season of my life ever. To be clear, I don't mean that in the "that's sick, bro" way, I mean that in the cold and flu season way and in the bronchitis/COVID-19/constant earache way. Myself and Valley Sentinel Managing Editor Taylor Scott have been literally sick with some brand of illness basically since the ball dropped and Dec. 31, 2022 morphed into Jan. 1, 2023 [insert COVID germ emoji here for foreshadowing].

We've shared many times that we really, truly are a small business and when you see the paper each week, it's produced mainly by us — myself and our managing editor and an incredibly dedicated group of community contributors. Because of that, and because we in our capacity as individuals are part of our larger community, we sometimes like to give a little glimpse of some behind the scenes action, and lately, that's been so, so many illnesses, a little bit of burn out, and a high point or two.

I personally contracted COVID-19 for the first time ever earlier in March, I'm not sure how I evaded it for this long but it finally got to me and to be honest, it really took me out. I'm of course over the worst of it and testing negative again, but I still have some lingering symptoms and fatigue. Luckily, I am fully vaccinated and boosted (and maybe developing spidey senses after having the cocktail of J&J, Moderna and Bivalent vaccines shot into my arm? TBD) so my sickness was likely much less intense than it could have been. It wasn't necessarily any worse than a cold or flu but it was much different. The fatigue that came with COVID was insane, I still find myself very tired or needed to rest after some activities.

The cough was loud and took your breath away, but it was dry and did nothing to get rid of the fountain of mucus pouring into my sinuses. I was also sick with symptoms much longer than with just a cold or flu. I was sick, with no improvement, for at least 10 days, and still have some lingering symptoms, more than two weeks after testing negative. While it wasn't any worse than other sicknesses I've had — it was rough. In addition to COVID, we've experienced a variety of cold-like illnesses and bronchitis, and to be honest, even though we're (thankfully) somewhat healthier now, all of these illnesses take a huge toll on you and on so many aspects of your life.

When you're so constantly sick, with barely any time to fully recover, get your life back on track, get your business back on track — it wears you down a little. Physically and mentally. When physically and mentally you can't do anything other than be sick, you're not in your typical routines and that shows in your work, in your social life, in your relationships and in your own mind. When you can't show up for those aspects of your life, you feel like a bad employee, a bad business owner, a bad partner, an absent friend, the list goes on.

Most people don't know just how close we are each edition to not publishing, whether it be an editor finishing up a big story that runs out of time to lay out the paper, or a press schedule that flexes its inflexibility, or any other of a million things that can happen all at once any given publication week.

There is so much more that we want to do and will do, from finding new and interactive ways to engage with our readers, to holding events and building community, but the reality is - on a good day - we are roughly 1.5 people, with amazingly talented contributors, all of whom have other jobs or obligations. We're not a huge operation or a corporate newsroom full of reporters, graphic designers and paginators — we're an all volunteer publication that is one illness, hard deadline or misbehaving graphic away from having to skip or postpone any given edition — and that's what happened.

Ultimately, as small business owners we very seldom get sick days. This month, we really had to wave the white flag and force a few into our schedules, and we're so grateful to our community for allowing us those, and giving us grace as we have a human moment.

On a slightly more uplifting and inspirational note, being sick on repeat did uncover a fun and invigorating experience — The Newsroom. Not ours, the fictional broadcast newsroom from the HBO original The Newsroom.

This was a show I watched when it first came out in 2012, as a very, very young aspiring journalist who'd just scored her first article in her monthly high school newspaper, a riveting preseason write-up about the girls volleyball team, this show spoke to me so deeply about the type of journalist I wanted to be when I grew up.

The show follows infamous TV news anchor Will McAvoy, who has a reputation for bringing in the highest ratings and doing whatever he thinks will get him those ratings, even if that means sacrificing the more informed newscast — until his boss hires a new executive producer to light a fire under him and force McAvoy to return to the cut throat, fact-focused news reporting they believe American voters need to be best informed.

The pair and their newsroom of young, inexperienced associate producers and interns set out on the journey that is News 2.0. They have a set of rules on doing the news, which include leaning away from two-sided storytelling (because as we're all rediscovering, some stories have one side, some have two and some have five. Two-sided storytelling isn't reliable storytelling - plus can we all acknowledge that if it is objectively raining outside, it isn't in the public's best interest to give a meteorologist and a rain-skeptic-conspiracy-theorist equal ink or airtime?) and instead focusing on facts and bringing truly credible and authoritative sources as guests on the show, instead of talking heads who further fact devoid polarization. The show follows their wins and losses and moments of lost faith, as the parent company pits effective news against entertainment and the constant need for ever more and more viewers to keep advertisers advertising (and executives rich).

Ultimately, News 2.0 puts the trust back in the hands of its viewers — it presents them with the facts and allows them to determine how that impacts their lives, their votes and their beliefs.

This show demonstrates effective and strong journalism — but it also contradicts nearly everything I was taught in journalism school. My education focused heavily on two-sided story telling, it emphasized that readers can't be trusted to think critically and the need for equal column inches and equal airtime to a source from each "side", it emphasized that reporters are blanketly unethical if they accept a class of water from a source during an interview, it teaches us that the perception of that glass of water is more important than the impartial, fact-based reporting we produce, that our readers or viewer can't be trusted to separate that glass of water from the 2000 word article you just published uncovering a corrupt local government, or sharing a girl scout's dream of being an astronaut or simply reporting on the construction that started up on Rainbow Road yesterday (just kidding). Those assertions only grew and became more gross and negligent as I left journalism school and entered into the real-world journalism industry, an industry that has grown and morphed into a hedge fund's best interest first, a don't write more than 600 words because no one bothers to read past the headline anyway, a don't write on that topic it doesn't get us any clicks or views, a pay us and we'll hand over the news industry. That is not good news.

As I watch my way through the journey of News 2.0 again, for the first time in nearly 10 years, as I lick my wounds from being chewed up and spit out by the corporate journalism world and navigate the journey that is my own news 2.0, I leave every episode holding back tears because it is a blaring alarm reminder of the journalism 14 year old me watched and screamed "I can't wait to do that someday."

The "industry" might not be doing News 2.0, but at Valley Sentinel we hope we are. Myself and our managing editor watch this show and see constant points of agreement and ways in which we've worked to make News 2.0 happen for our community — without even realizing it. I can't say thank you enough for allowing 14 year old me to live out my News 2.0 dreams. All of this to say—we took some time to celebrate our wins, nurse our wounds and illnesses, and do a deeper dive on some ongoing reporting. We hope you can appreciate that we care more. We look forward to showing you just how much. (And go watch The Newsroom, you won't regret it.)

— Nicole Aimone, Editor-in-Chief

SUNSHINE WEEK ROUND-UP



MARCH 12-18, 2023

Sunshine Week, held annually in March, was launched in 2005 by the American Society of News Editors (now News Leaders Association), aims to promote open government and shine light into the dark recesses of government secrecy.

Lone Rock lawsuit, open meetings update

Gary Ernest Grass, esq., Legal Editor

A couple months back, I wrote here that the Valley Sentinel was suing the Village of Lone Rock. It feels like time for an update, and I wanted to talk about our two cases -- one not yet filed and one possibly almost done, and why they are so different.

As you may recall, Lone Rock's Village Board had a special meeting back last October on Halloween night and did not let the Valley Sentinel know about it until afterwards. The following day there was another meeting. The Valley Sentinel received its legally required notice more than 23 hours late, which was pretty bad since the paper was only entitled to 24 hours of notice to begin with.

We followed this with a couple of requests for public records, mostly concerning those meetings. Our requests were ignored. It is clear the clerk got the emails which made the requests, because we received a response addressing the clerk's understanding of why the meetings were legal, but despite repeated inquiries, we got nowhere on the records.

Public records and open meetings are closely related issues, and each is treated in its own subchapter of Chapter 19 in the state statutes. But they are in many ways different animals.

A public records lawsuit can be filed immediately by the requester as soon as they have a cause of action. An action arises when the custodian of a record explicitly refuses access to the record,

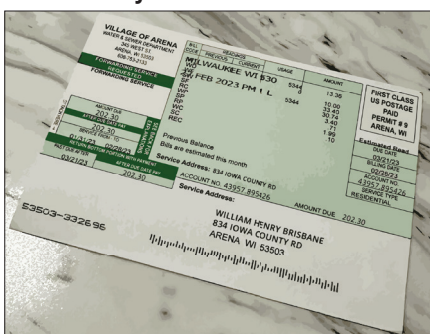
supplies a copy with unwarranted redactions or omissions, or attempts to charge an exorbitant fee. Alternatively, one can simply wait and sue when the delay becomes unreasonable, but if the case is filed too soon, a court may say that the party suing jumped the gun and should have given it more time. The centerpiece of the action is demand for an extraordinary writ, issued from the court to the records custodian, ordering release of records. In addition there may be an order to pay court costs, attorney fees, actual damages or a small set amount for each violation.

We filed that suit and were quickly talking to Lone Rock's attorneys about what we wanted. Did we just want the records? Yes, of course! We also wanted a small amount to cover our filing fees and so on, but mainly we wanted the records. The Village started to give us records. We haven't reached a complete settlement yet, but a large part of the case has been effectively achieved its purpose by triggering the release of records that we wanted. Sorry we had to sue to get there, but it seems we did. It's still possible some records will be denied or so delayed that we will not be able to settle on those, but we are optimistic. We anticipate that we will get everything we are entitled to and that this experience will encourage the Village to better comply with the laws moving forward.

Open meetings cases are a little continued on page 5

ON THE COVER

"Estimated read" (2023) Illustration, by Julianna Williams

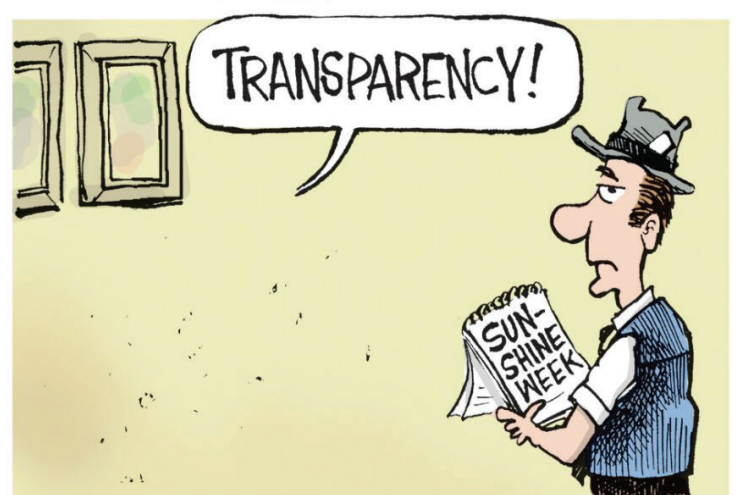


This composite illustration is representative of a Village of Arena water bill with an estimated read. In February and March 2023 an astounding 85% of water bills in Arena were estimated reads.

While the village clerk tells us the issue has been fixed now after an antenna upgrade, this isn't the first time Valley Sentinel has gotten complaints about Arena's water bills.

Water bills continue to be a much-discussed topic, join us as we take a dive into audits and public records on pages 1, 14 and 15 of this edition to try to make sense of the numbers.

Submit your artwork or photography for cover consideration: editor@valleysentinelnews.com



EDITORIAL

Open government report card: Arena improves, Lone Rock sued, other local public bodies receive letters

Sunshine Week is a time to celebrate government transparency and public service, as well as a time to address lapses in the same. In October 2020, shortly after incorporating and shortly before our first edition, we sent out a Wis. Stat. 19.84(1)(b) written request by email from news media to our local governmental bodies asking that Valley Sentinel be sent meeting notices for the respective governmental bodies. Recently, we sent reminder letters by mail to the local governmental bodies in our immediate coverage area that have not been consistent in sending us meeting notices, with several having sent none at all in the past nearly 2.5 years.

What is public notice? What is news media notice? Wis. Stat. 19.84 outlines the various ways a public body — such as a village or town board — needs to provide proper notice of its meetings. Best practice is to post those notices in a mix of ways most likely to apprise residents and those interested. Other requirements include at least 24 hours notice, generally, and requirements that the subject matter of the notice — usually in the form of the agenda — is reasonably likely to apprise members of the public and the news media of what action the public body will be taking.

When news media request notice under Wis. Stat. 19.84(1)(b) it is separate from the notice given to the public, but equally as necessary. This notice is required for meetings to be considered properly noticed. Further, Wis. Stats. § 19.96 & 19.97 prescribe the forfeitures possible when notice isn't proper and state any action taken at a meeting of a governmental body held in violation is potentially voidable.

Public notice is often confused with paid legal notices, which are required for certain meetings and hearings by statute, but what Valley Sentinel was and is asking for are emails from the clerks of local public bodies with notice of upcoming meetings and its agenda items. These meetings may additionally need legal notice, but that's a sidebar.

Valley Sentinel requested all meeting notices, for each public body and its subunits. Even for public bodies that have done well sending notices for their boards, we still have issues receiving committee and commission notices for their subunits, as well as joint committees — despite our request covering those bodies as well.

We should note that we were then, and still are, figuring out the extent of our local government coverage and how it should look, so we never did follow up on our request until recently with many of the townships below, so we certainly give them some leeway. Our lack of resources and manpower makes consistent, minute-like coverage difficult — but we strive to cover local government topically where we feel the story has a compelling local community interest and value to our readers.

Much of the below grades are due to the public body's clerk, for better or worse. Clerks have a tough job, a job that can be made harder or easier by the board and the community they serve. But both clerks and local elected officials have the duty to ensure things are being done correctly and in the public interest in their community.

Why is this important? This is important to us because if we're not getting notice as a newspaper it's likely you're not getting notice either. Recent studies have shown civic engagement and strong local journalism directly correlate to a number of local government metrics like local government bond rates, including rates to fund government infrastructure projects. For example, where robust local journalism disappears or is lax, local government borrowing costs increase because less information is publicly available, and local officials are no longer monitored as closely, reducing the quality of governance. Simply put, the financial sector views an area with low civic engagement and lax or nonexistent local journalistic oversight as a risky investment. Without open government it becomes increasingly hard for us to do our job.

SUNSHINE WEEK 2023 LOCAL OPEN GOVERNMENT REPORT CARDS

Sauk County: A+

Valley Sentinel receives County Board notices promptly as well as notices for all its various committees and department meetings. Sauk County is proactive and robust in its media and public relations, sending out press releases and community events often.

But it may be important to note County Board agenda and meeting length were reduced noticeably and dramatically following the hire of a county administrator, potentially — in our editorial board's opinion — to the detriment of public access and civic engagement. Meeting agendas have slowly increased in size again in the last year after the noticeable decline.

Iowa County: F

Valley Sentinel received a couple county board agenda meeting notices when we first asked, but nothing since.

Valley Sentinel occasionally receives county emergency management media notices, however.

Richland County: A-

Valley Sentinel receives County Board notices promptly as well as notices for all its various committees and department meetings.

Richland County takes a slight hit in its grade with the recent UW-Richland negotiations (and lack of legal action to enforce its contract with the UW System). We've heard concerns that the public has with not just how the UW-System's decision to constructively close the campus lacked public input and hearings, but also that much of the County Board's response has been to hold questionable closed sessions rather than discuss its options openly. We concur. Having a closed session with counsel to discuss litigation strategy is understandable, but having a closed session to discuss trying to negotiate in good faith with a state agency that has no intention to do so isn't in the public's best interest.

River Valley School District: A

Valley Sentinel receives River Valley School District notices promptly as well as notices for all its various committees. This is much improved following disagreement in our first year publishing. The School Board established an ad hoc committee of residents, with a defined membership and defined mission to advise the board on a possible diversity statement to be adopted by the District. Many ad hoc committees aren't necessarily required to notice their meetings (although it is good practice), but legal experts consulted agreed that a policy-writing ad hoc committee that had a defined membership and mission that reported to the board with its findings and recommended policy would need its meetings noticed, which the district failed to do.

Village of Arena: B

The Village of Arena has improved after an open meetings complaint last year due to an improper closed session. The meeting was re-done and the notices have been proper since.

Clerk DeNean Naeger is very responsive when records are requested and questions are asked about the village, she provides an invaluable crutch to the village's officials.

The Village, fairly or not, loses a point as we've stopped receiving the Fire & EMS Board notices after a fairly consistent last year. This comes at a time when the joint village and town Fire Board is struggling to fund and man their EMS program, with fingers pointing at one another.

It's also important to note that Arena is one of only a couple villages that doesn't stream or conference their meetings for accessibility, and while that's not a requirement of an open meeting, it does create a more inclusive way of allowing residents to be informed on their local government. They also don't video or

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There is a part of the Open Meetings statute that is titled "Public Notice." This includes "notice to the public" and notice to news media. Understandably, some government bodies can confuse the obligations of "notice to the public" with the more inclusive obligations of the "Public Notice" statute, hence misunderstanding their obligations to news media.

A second source of confusion is an entirely separate set of laws regarding legal notices. Local governments must send out paid legal notices of certain kinds of government actions, such as budget-setting and new ordinances. Both legal notices and open meetings notices to news media serve the function of informing the public and specific parties with the most direct interests of government activity

by utilizing the press, but they are governed by completely different laws. So, for example, to receive public notices, a media outlet need only put in a request, and this could include a newspaper, radio station, or even a blog. Once the media organization gets the notice, they can decide to just ignore it, or write about the meeting it notices. Legal notices are completely different: they are

advertisements that have to be earned. Only official papers which meet certain requirements are eligible for them, and the notices must be run in print.

Despite being completely different, both are forms of notice and it's not rare for local governments to get their obligations under these two kinds of notice mixed up.

—Gary Ernest Grass, esq., Legal Editor

Contact us

PO Box 144
Spring Green, Wisconsin 53588 USA
(608) 588-6694
editor@valleysentinelnews.com
valleysentinelnews.com

EDITORIAL

Editor-in-Chief

Nicole Aimore

Managing Editor

Taylor Scott

Legal Editor

Gary Ernest Grass, esq.

Have graphic design experience or interested in meetings, events or writing and becoming a community contributor? Let us know. Thank you to all of our contributors for believing in our community.

Editorial Policy

On certain topics in areas of great community interest, the editors of the Valley Sentinel may take positions they believe best represent and serve the interests of the community. Any opinions or positions taken by the editorial board are separate and distinct in labeling and substance from the community journalism that appears in the rest of the publication and does not affect the integrity and impartiality of our reporting.

Letter to the Editor Policy

Letters submitted for consideration are subject to fact-checking and editing for space and clarity. Submissions must have a compelling local community interest. Letters to the editor must fit within a 500-word limit, and include name, city and phone number. Phone numbers are for office use only and will not be published. Letters of a political nature, without chance of rebuttal, will not be published the week before an election.

Full and up-to-date policies available at: www.valleysentinelnews.com

Column Policy

Editors may feature opinion columns written by public figures, members of the public or other publication staff. Columns reflect the opinions of the individual contributors and do not represent positions of the publication. Guest columns of an anticipated length more than 500 words should seek prior editor authorization.

Community Discussion Policy

From time to time the editorial board may select letters to the editor of a particular compelling community interest where a public figure or accountable public action is the recipient of criticism and allow, in the same issue, the subject of the criticism chance for rebuttal, with expounded independent input. The format shall be point, counterpoint and expert analysis. This community discussion shall serve as a moderated dialogue that presents multiple views of important community topics.

LOWER WISCONSIN RIVER VALLEY SENTINEL

REGULAR CONTRIBUTORS IN THIS EDITION

Graphic Design

Julianna Williams

Commentary/Opinion Column

Beverly Pestel

Commentary/Opinion Column

Barb Garvoille

Commentary/Opinion Column

Katie Green



WISCONSIN NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION FOUNDATION

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Covering Arena, Lone Rock, Plain, Spring Green and the surrounding areas in Sauk, Iowa and Richland counties.

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Valley Sentinel is published in Spring Green, Wisconsin every other Thursday by Lower Wisconsin River Valley Sentinel, LLC. ISSN 2694-541X (print) — ISSN 2694-5401 (online)

Member, Wisconsin Newspaper Association

VALLEY SENTINEL WINS BEST IN DIVISION E AT WISCONSIN NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION AWARDS BANQUET

The Wisconsin Newspaper Association recently recognized the state's newspapers for their exceptional work during its 2022 Better Newspaper Contest Awards Banquet. The event took place on March 24, at The Madison Concourse Hotel in downtown Madison. Among the winners, Valley Sentinel was awarded as the Best in Division E.

The contest received a total of 2,230 entries from 106 newspapers, with eligible entries published between September 1, 2021, and August 31, 2022. A panel of judges from the Arkansas Press Association evaluated the entries and selected the winners.

Annually, newspapers from across the state can submit entries in the awards for editorial and advertising. Publications are divided into most categories based on circulation size and daily versus weekly publications.

The best in division winners were: Division E (non-daily circulation of 2,249 or less): Valley Sentinel, Spring Green; Division D (non-daily circulation of 2,250 – 4,499): Superior Telegram; Division C (non-daily circulation of at least 4,500): The Lakeland Times, Minocqua; Division B (daily circulation of less than 9,999): Herald Times Reporter, Manitowoc; Division A (daily circulation of at least 10,000): The Gazette, Janesville.

Valley Sentinel is in good company, with a majority of the publications in the Wisconsin Newspaper Association falling under Division E, with over 100 of the nearly 200 publications in the Wisconsin Newspaper Association belonging to that division.

Out of the other Sauk, Iowa and Richland county papers, the Baraboo News Republic (Division B) took home first place for Feature Story (Profile) and honorable mention for General News Story. Other area Wisconsin Newspaper Association member papers, the Home News (Division E), the Dodgeville Chronicle (Division D), the Richland Observer (Division E), The Democrat Tribune (Division E), and the Reedsburg Independent (Division E), were not represented at the awards.

In addition to winning Best in Division, Valley Sentinel's staff was recognized with 22 awards out of 50 entries. Co-Owner and Editor-in-Chief Nicole Aimone, Co-Owner and Managing Editor Taylor Scott, Legal Editor Gary Ernest Grass, esq., Graphic Designer Julianna Williams, Columnist Barb Garvoille, Columnist Beverly Pestel, former Graphic Designers Anna Stocks-Hess and Whitney Kurdziel, and contributor Jolean Louis were among those honored.

Valley Sentinel's awards include first place in the Open Records/Freedom of Information Award, All-Around Newspaper Photography, Artistic Photo, Best Large Ad, and Best Small Ad categories. The publication also received second place in the Community Engagement Award, General News Story, Artistic Photo, Bill Payne Award (Best Ad Overall), Best Large Ad, and Best Small Ad categories. Third place honors were awarded to Valley Sentinel in Best Front Page, Best Special Section (Editorial), Reporting on Local Government, Local Column, Feature Photo, Artistic Photo, and Best Niche Product. Honorable mentions for Valley Sentinel were given for Best Headlines, Local Column, Overall Page Design and Best Newspaper Promotion.

"A sincere thank you to our contributors, our readers and our community for believing in our mission of doing something different and supporting us on the journey," said Aimone. "We couldn't have done it without your support."

Valley Sentinel's first place in the Open Records/Freedom of Information category went to its editors Aimone, Scott



Photo by Kathleen Farrow

Members of Valley Sentinel pictured with the publication's 22 awards, including Best in Division E, after the Wisconsin Newspaper Association's awards banquet in Madison March 24. Pictured from left: Beverly Pestel, columnist; Anna Stocks-Hess, former graphic designer; Nicole Aimone, co-owner, publisher, editor-in-chief; Taylor Scott, co-owner, publisher, managing editor, Julianna Williams, graphic designer; Gary Ernest Grass, esq., legal editor.

and Grass for their coverage of the rush to fill the Village of Arena's public works superintendent position that resulted in the filing of open meetings complaints. The judges said, "This is an example of following up words with actions, which is sometimes an integral piece in the pursuit of transparency. Explaining the law and its benefits bring real value." It's important to note that this was a category where the weekly divisions were combined and Valley Sentinel was not only competing with other Division E papers, but also larger Division D and C papers.

Noting Valley Sentinel's sweep of the Artistic Photo category, Aimone emphasized the importance of Valley Sentinel's effective use of photos.

"A good news photo follows the basic rule of thirds, wanting the subject in the top or bottom of any third of the shot. It has action, you see people celebrating, protesting, embracing, working in the moment. It's not staged but a true snapshot of exactly what's going on at the newsworthy event it's reporting," said Aimone. "A strong artistic local news photo will be that once-in-a-lifetime, breathtaking shot of a place or scene everyone in the area knows, but you were lucky enough to have a camera with you to get that shot".

Aimone also noted the first and second places in both the Best Large Ad and Best Small Ad, as well as the second place finish in the Bill Payne Award for best overall ad.

"We pride ourselves not just on our offerings to our readers, but also on our offerings to our area business community. Valley Sentinel is a free publication because we believe not only that everyone should be able to read the news, but also because of the value it offers to our local businesses whose advertisements reach that many more eyes each edition due to our accessibility," says Aimone. "We're so honored that the judges recognized the creative energy and passion that our designers have put into designing engaging ads for our local businesses."

Other notable awards include second place in the Community Engagement

passionate community members around and hard launch in the near future," says Scott. "This is a proof of concept for us that this idea resonates with experts that know what a force for good local journalism and community publications can be."

"It's representative of the larger proof of concept that our publication encompasses. I like to tell people we're at 15% of phase one of three of what we want to accomplish in building community and where we want to take Valley Sentinel and related businesses or foundations," continues Scott. "If a ragtag group of what we proudly describe as roughly 1.5 people and some amazing community contributors and volunteers can be recognized as the best newspaper our size in the state with a shoestring budget and no corporate infrastructure, imagine how much community building we can do in the future with a little growth."

Valley Sentinel has been serving the Spring Green area community since October 2020, covering local news and events, meetings, arts & culture and more. This year was Valley Sentinel's first year eligible for the WNA awards. The publication is committed to growing and providing quality journalism, while navigating and pioneering what the future of community news can look like and all the ways in which our communities can engage with it.

"We'd like to again thank our readers, contributors and our community for their on-going support that made these awards possible," says Aimone. "These awards belong to the community and our supporters just as much as us, for allowing us to grow, try something different and for fostering our success. We have so much more planned to do, we'll only succeed with your support."

To view the complete list of winners and judges' comments, go to wnanews.com/wp-content/2022BNC/WNA. For more information about Valley Sentinel, visit www.valleysentinelnews.com/about.

WE'RE LOOKING FOR INTERNS AND COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTORS

Looking for a challenge?

We are looking for interns/volunteers who want to be in the unique position to learn the nuts and bolts of a news media publication that started from the ground up.

You will have the chance to make an impact at the ground level of a startup and see the effect of your work and ideas carried out with a lot of flexibility, in an environment and creative culture you can help influence and create.

Available subject areas:

EDITORIAL/JOURNALISM
SOCIAL MEDIA
ADVERTISING/MARKETING

GRAPHIC DESIGN/PAGE DESIGN/LAYOUT
DISTRIBUTION/CIRCULATION/CRM MNGMT
PODCASTING/AUDIO PRODUCTION

AND MORE!

We are a new, all volunteer local news source that holds a strong belief that by working to keep our communities informed and engaged on a variety of topics including arts & culture, events, community news and serving as a watchdog for our local governmental bodies, we can help create a strong identity for our community and ignite positive growth and change throughout the area.

Interested? Send us your area(s) of interest and a resume to:

editor@valleysentinelnews.com

Internship will be unpaid, interns will be required to sign a FLSA-compliant internship agreement. If credit is available from intern's educational institution for participation in an internship, we are glad to work with you to meet any requirements for receiving credit.

Want to help build community? Know a college student that's looking for a summer or fall internship for academic credit or to gain experience? Already attending village board or school board meetings and want to record or report on them? Want to engage with arts & culture, ag, businesses and other topics important to our community? Want to take scenic walks or drives delivering papers to subscribers and businesses?

We have so many ideas to grow and do more for our community, but we need help, we *CAN'T* do it alone. If you want to be a part of something bigger please email us and let us know what your interests are:

editor@valleysentinelnews.com

Areas in most need:

- Graphic design (publication layout, visual story design, infographics)
- Sports reporting
- Municipal meeting recorders/reporters
- School board reporters
- Social media posting/creation
- E-newsletter
- Website posting
- Agriculture reporter/columnist (current events)

We have the infrastructure set up for most of these areas, we're just in need of manpower from passionate community members.

OPINION/EDITORIAL

EDITORIAL (CON.)

Open government report card: Arena improves, Lone Rock sued, other local public bodies receive letters

continued from page 3

audio record their meetings currently despite their longstanding tradition of doing so previously, as well as having the infrastructure and equipment to do so. Their report card and the public interest would be improved by them returning to those practices.

Village of Lone Rock: F

After a rocky start, then a lapse that resulted in an open meetings complaint and a public records lawsuit (after Clerk Tammy Christianson erroneously claimed notice to the press was simply an FYI, instead of an actual, legal requirement), and then a rocky restart that will likely result in another open meetings complaint after a closed meeting was improperly held without notice to discuss the resulting public records lawsuit, Lone Rock has been consistently sending meeting notices for the last few months.

Village of Plain: A

Perfect. Village of Plain Clerk Sheila Carver is great to work with. We get meeting notices and agendas promptly and never have a problem. Although we'd like to see the Fire & EMS Board notices as well as other subunit/committee notices.

Village of Spring Green: A

After a couple hiccups a year or so ago where media was booted from a virtual meeting before a motion and vote to go into closed session were taken, as well

as a conspicuously lacking of notice in the initial vote to hire Clerk Wendy Crary as Village Administrator as well had to be redone, the Village of Spring Green has been perfect in getting meeting notices and meeting minutes out promptly. They have had meaningful discussions recently about how to best return to in person meetings in a hybrid fashion that is accessible virtually. These efforts should be applauded.

Town of Arena: F

After several requests for meeting notices, we still haven't received any. However, previous clerk Joni Johnson-Kropp was helpful in forwarding information about a failed Vortex project in the township.

The Town has undergone turnover in clerks and this surprisingly large township has been dealing with some outsized issues with EMS services and a village within its bounds that cannot be counted on to maintain its services. Ensuring proper notice will help get more people involved and will help educate residents about the potentially dire situations the Village and Township of Arena find themselves in.

Town of Bear Creek: N/A

We can't say with certainty that the Town of Bear Creek received a request prior to those sent out recently. We'll provide a grade next year.

With excellent Village of Plain Clerk Sheila Carver at the helm here as well, we have little doubt notices will be proper.

Town of Black Earth: N/A

While a small sliver of the Town of Black Earth is within our immediate coverage area, not enough of it is to send a request at this time.

Town of Buena Vista: F*

We have never received a meeting notice despite our request. Period.

*Clerk Van Nelson has acknowledged our recent request and committed to providing notices.

Town of Clyde: A

Taking over from a wonderful clerk in her own right, Clerk Leah Spicer has hit the ground running and has proven herself a sharp and adept public official. Notices are prompt and complete, and minutes are well written. This rural community is lucky.

Town of Dodgeville: N/A*

This appears to be our first time sending a news media notice request to the Town of Dodgeville - which starts just south of the House on the Rock and encompasses Gov. Dodge State Park - both of which we consider within our immediate coverage area - and continues south to encompass a much larger area.

*It's important to note that Clerk Sara Olson started sending meeting notices immediately upon receipt of our letter.

Town of Franklin: F

We have never received a meeting notice despite our request. Period.

Town of Honey Creek: F*

The previous Clerk was sent our request in 2020, but we never received notices.

*Current Clerk Jennifer Evert started sending meeting notices immediately upon receipt of our letter. We'll provide an updated grade next year.

Town of Ithaca: N/A

While a small sliver of the Town of Ithaca is within our immediate coverage area, not enough of it is to send a request at this time.

Town of Ridgeway: N/A

We can't say with certainty that the Town of Ridgeway received a request prior to the requests sent out recently. We'll provide a grade next year.

Town of Spring Green: A

Perfect. We get meeting notices and agendas promptly from Clerk Vicki Terpstra.

Town of Troy: F

We have never received a meeting notice despite our request. Period.

Town of Wyoming: F

We have never received a meeting notice despite our request. However, it should be noted that Town Clerk Mary Lloyd-Jones has been helpful in the past with responding to emails requesting election information and absentee ballot numbers.

Legal Editor: Lone Rock lawsuit, open meetings updates

continued from page 3

different. There is a different theoretical and practical relationship between the public body and the individual. A meeting cannot be opened up after the fact. The logic of the case and the possible remedies are therefore much different.

In a public records case, a requester does not need to show that they needed a record or were harmed by not getting it, because the real issue is the public policy of open government, and even though one person may specifically have been denied access to records, it is the entire public that is harmed. In open meetings cases, this idea is kicked up one more level. Where the plaintiff in a public records case acquires their ability to sue from having requested a record and not getting it, a plaintiff in an open meetings case does not have to be someone locked out of the meeting.

They don't have to have any connection to the meeting. The case is even more focused on the public interest, so much that the person who sues does not even do so in their own name but on behalf of the state.

Filing an open meetings case is a distinct process. Before you can run into the court representing the State of Wisconsin, you need to file a sworn report (a "verified complaint") to the attorney general or the district attorney, or in some cases, corporation counsel for the county. These are the state's preferred officials for taking action, but if they decline or do not act within 20 days, an ordinary person can act for the state.

Remedies in an open meetings case are mostly not designed to benefit the person filing the case. They can recover their court costs and attorney fees, but will not come out ahead on money.

Individual officers who violated the law may be forced to pay the equivalent of a fine to the state or county, which unlike most liabilities of public officers cannot be paid for them from the public treasury.

What happens to the business conducted at the unlawful meeting? Well, it is not automatically void, but the court does have the power to nullify all or part of the public business performed at a meeting that has been found unlawful. The court must balance the public interest in transparent government against the possible disruption to innocent people who relied on the validity of the government's acts.

The Valley Sentinel has made its report to the district attorney and has the go-ahead to sue the Village of Lone Rock on behalf of the state. Since its last report it has learned of additional violations which it will also be reporting.

As soon as the Valley Sentinel learned of the unlawfully conducted meetings, it reached out to the Village, informing them of the meetings' illegality and asking the Village whether the meetings would be done over again, so that the public would have appropriate access and the business of the meetings could be performed again free of any legal taint. This would have been a wise action, which would have assured that no public business would be rendered void and the worst the Village would face would be some small payments of legal costs and some small fines to its members. For whatever reason, the Village did not do this. Perhaps they feared the outcome of the business would be different. Perhaps they were irrationally confident of the legality of the meetings.

It will be a big step to go into court on these claims, and ask the court to undo the actions taken at the meeting.

The Village of Lone Rock committed to hundreds of thousands of dollars in expenditures on top of the annual budget. It is likely someone will not welcome such a reversal. But the fact that the actions of the Village were momentous is equally a reason why they should have been performed with respect for the law and the rights of citizens to access.

We've previously addressed why we think the open meetings law is important. It is not just a shield against corrupt action but a means of allowing public engagement, which might lead to more informed and better decisions. Outside parties look for such transparency as a sign of a government that is competent, honest, and responsible to its citizens. It gives the government credibility and makes it more credit-worthy. And for many of us, it is not just a matter of practical benefit but of principle. It is the life breath of a functioning democracy.

We are always happy to see issues like this resolved without recourse to a courtroom, but we are also not reluctant to sue when justice and principle demand it.



DONATION DRIVE

If you are able and enjoyed this week's edition, please consider donating \$1 today.

Scan to support local journalism!



OPINION/EDITORIAL

Capitol Report — Marklein: It's Not A Cut

Sen. Howard Marklein (R-Spring Green)

If your child asks you for a \$10 raise for their allowance and you give them \$5, is it a cut?

No.

Your child's allowance is increasing by \$5. They may have wanted the additional \$5. But you did not give it to them. Whatever your reasons, you decided to give them a \$5 increase.

This makes sense, right? An increase is not a cut.

Unfortunately, in political circles, we often hear that we are "cutting" things when we don't give an organization, an agency or even a Governor what they want. We might even allocate more money for something, but if it doesn't rise to the level that they want, they call it a "cut". An increase is not a cut. New funds are not cut. A new program is not a cut. Right?

Also, unfortunately, in political circles, we often see organizations, agencies and even Governors request much, much, much more than they actually need to accomplish our mutual goals so that they can point a finger and say that we "cut" something. They set their bar extremely high, knowing full well that it is outrageous, so that they can criticize the legislature and call it a "cut".

Again, an increase is still not a cut.

Some may call this a negotiation technique. Some may say, "you gotta start somewhere." I say that an increase is still not a cut.



Senator Howard Marklein

The legislature will be building the state budget from the current base budget. The base budget is our existing foundation. It is the current, ongoing, state spending plan. It includes operating costs and obligations. These operating costs and obligations include personnel, programs that were

designed to continue, commitments for buildings, infrastructure and debt.

The base budget was bipartisan. It is the budget that the Governor signed and supported just 18 short months ago. It has been working well for us since it went into effect July 1, 2021. The current base budget kept us in terrific fiscal shape and has set Wisconsin up for success despite a pandemic, a difficult economy and inflation.

The "Governor's Budget" is a list of ideas. It is not the budget. When we decide to do something other than the Governor's idea, we are not "cutting" the Governor's budget. The Governor's budget is not law. It is a proposal. It is a list of requests. We cannot "cut" the Governor's budget because it does not exist.

There are some things we need to do in the next state budget that will add to our base budget. We need to address funding for education. We need to address compensation for state employees in an inflationary economy. We need to fund agencies to meet our obligations. We need to continue to maintain and improve roads. We need to fund our priorities.

However, we will not spend at all of the levels proposed by Governor Evers – this is not a cut. When we don't massively increase

spending – it's not a cut. Reasonable increases, responsible new spending and new investments are not a cut.

The non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB) recently released their independent analysis of the Governor's Budget Proposal. This analysis confirms that the Governor's ideas increase spending by 17%. It also confirms that if we were to adopt the Governor's ideas, our surplus would be gone and we would be in a \$3 billion deficit by 2027. We have worked too hard, together, to put Wisconsin in a terrific financial position only to adopt spending that returns us to massive debts. You don't want that, right?

So, when the legislature begins crafting the state budget and adding items to the base budget, please remember that we are not "cutting" the budget. The Governor, like your child, may ask for \$10. But we, like you, may provide a \$5 increase instead. Either way, it's still more, not less. And it's not a cut.

As always, please do not hesitate to connect with me to provide input, ideas or to seek assistance. Send an email to sen.marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov or call 608-266-0703. I want to hear from you.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Sen. Marklein is sounding more and more desperate in his attempt to convince us the "skinny budget" he and his Republican buddies are working on is exactly what we need. Does the senator really think that the taxpayers of Wisconsin should thank the Legislature for giving us an "allowance" - but not one that could in any way meet our needs? This situation is more akin to parents taking custody of money earned by their children for mowing lawns in the community, then refusing to allow them access to enough of it to put gas back in the mower. "This makes

sense, right?" No, Senator, it does not.

And yes, Senator, an increase is still a "cut" when it does not replace the resources that have been denied us for years because of insufficient state funding to meet our needs. The Senator keeps going back to the fact that the previous budget was bipartisan. Actually, the previous budget was not bipartisan in any meaningful way. It was signed by the Governor because he refused to hold the citizens of Wisconsin hostage to a stingy legislature. He signed the budget because he knew the legislature was prepared to make the citizens pay for their intransigence and

determination not to give a Democratic Governor any wins. Years ago there was a popular gadget that was purported to be a treatment for ADHD and anxiety. It turned out to be worthless and became nothing more than a considerable distraction as a toy used by children and was banned in many schools. It was called a fidget spinner, and it is a perfect analogy for Sen. Marklein and the rest of his Republican buddies in the legislature: all spin and no value.

We need to call on Sen. Marklein to stop this nonsense. When he talks about "[r]easonable increases," and "responsible

new spending" he is simply spinning a tale to justify stashing away more of our tax dollars until (hopefully, not when) the legislature could get away with giving it to their wealthy donors.

Trying to scare us with "massive" future debt and saying "You don't want that, right?" is just more spin and we know how worthless that is.

Sen. Marklein asks for your input – please, let him have it.

Bill Cary
Rockbridge, Wisconsin

Dear Editor,

"Guns are the leading cause of death among US children and teens since surpassing car accidents in 2020." Let that sink in. This from a CNN article referencing a report by the CDC. Don't trust CDC or CNN? How about the National Institutes of Health or the New England Journal of Medicine or the Kaiser Family Foundation. In a country that professes to love its children, how is it that we continue to allow our

kids to get slaughtered in school? More and more kids, having survived the trauma of one mass shooting are now graduating on to their second.

I'm not being hyperbolic with the use of the word "slaughter". Ask any trauma surgeon or just google it. The bullet from an assault rifle essentially explodes inside the body leaving little left to repair. This is particularly true for small bodies and most especially if hit with more than one round...

the more likely scenario. I'm reminded of a reporting on the Uvalde school shooting some months back. One of the young victims, Maite Rodriguez, could be identified only by her green converse sneakers. I just can't unsee that.

How is it that this "American exceptionalism" continues unabated? How is it that a minority of Americans can assert their "right" to carry an assault rifle over the rights that WE have? You know, the right to

expect that our kids won't be subject to battlefield risks at school. Does it not gall you that our children learn shooter drills before they learn their ABCs? Is this

the America we want our children to grow up in? I'm assuming that most if not all parents take their role as protector seriously. Regrettably, parents' concerns are ignored.

Pat O'Boyle
Richland Center, Wisconsin

Dear Editor,

Hello! I am a third-grade student in Northern Virginia, and my class is learning about the United States. Each third-grader has been assigned a specific state, and I have received your state! I am very excited to learn more about the great state of Wisconsin and wish to represent you well in my final State Fair project in the month of May.

I am writing to ask you to please publish the letter below in your Letters to the Editor section of your newspaper. It will enhance my learning if I can get the perspective from actual people who live in and love their state!

Thank you for your kind consideration in

helping me with my project!

Sincerely,
Bryce McKinney

Dear People of the Great State of Wisconsin,

Hello! I am a third-grade student in Northern Virginia. Our class is learning about the United States, and I will be teaching our school about the state of Wisconsin. In the month of May, I will create a display for our State Fair that I hope will make you proud.

Although I have gathered facts about your state from books and websites, I think that I can receive the best information from the people who live there. This is why I am

writing to you. I am hoping that you would be willing to send me some items to help me learn more about the best things in your state. You might consider sending items such as postcards, pictures, souvenirs, this newspaper article, or any other unique items that would be useful or show your state pride. Here are a few questions:

- Why do you live in your state?/What first brought your family there?
- How do you make money?/What is your job?
- What does your state look like?
- What do people do for fun?
- What animals live there?
- What traditional food/recipes does your state have?

• What type of music is native to your state?

• Do you have a state athletic team?

• What geographic features are unique to your state?

I will need to gather all of my information by the second week of May. You can mail items to the address below. I really appreciate your help!

Sincerely,
Bryce McKinney
Miss Campbell's Class
The Langley School
1411 Balls Hill Road
McLean, Virginia 22101

Dear Editor,

I am on the negotiating team meeting with UW System to seek ways to revitalize the UW Richland Campus. We have several ideas that would meet the needs of communities surrounding the campus. However, it seems that for everything proposed to UW-System, they answer "no resources."

The same for our county state mandated programs that have yearly decreasing support.

It seems to me that Senator Howard Marklein, Chair of the State Finance Committee, who is working on the new budget, is holding the whole state hostage because of some sort of a power trip. This is all reinforced by Vos the State Assembly leader.

Is cutting taxes what they aim for as the most important item in their political careers? What about education in our rural areas- and the increased tax revenue that brings?

When did our state representatives quit caring about the public who elected them and join the Republican campaign to starve counties and universities? It is time

for the public to contact them and let them know our community needs. Let's make Wisconsin a proud place to live again.

Senator State Howard Marklein, sen.marklein@legis.wi.gov, phone 608-266-0703

Linda Gentes
Richland Center, Wisconsin