

EDITOR'S COLUMN

It's our first edition of the new year, and while I have a love-hate relationship with New Year's resolutions, we wanted to take some time to share a few resolutions we are making, in hopes to give our community and readers what's needed through our publication.

In October 2022, we passed the anniversary of our second full calendar year of publication. However, due to when Valley Sentinel started publishing at the end of 2020, 2023 will technically be the 4th calendar year in which we've published an edition. You'll see this reflected on our volume number on our cover.

We've shared many times the story of how we started this small business by building a desk, cashing in savings bonds and working hard to make a dream come true. We started very small and have had some tremendous growth since the days of building a desk, but it hasn't always been easy (something we share with our readers semi-regularly as well).

While we've had some amazing growth throughout our time, we're still very much a grassroots, small business. There is still only a small handful of dedicated, passionate volunteers making this happen each edition and we're always doing the best we can. Part of doing the best we can does mean changing things that aren't working, or refocusing on areas that aren't getting enough attention (and trust us, we've found plenty of each of those things).

You'll notice this edition is again shorter than we'd like. It's certainly not for a lack of content. We're doing work in the background to find the best ways to share and present this content in a way that becomes familiar and easy to engage with. As we start the new year, we are practically bursting at the seams with the ideas we'd like to create, share and put out into the community — but we have a few major resolutions we'd like to focus on, and commit to right here in the first edition of 2023.

The first being a commitment to civic engagement and the watchdog role of news media. The Sentinel in our name implies a certain level of watchdog journalism that we haven't had the resources to consistently commit to in the ways we've wanted. While our resources and manpower haven't necessarily changed, we want to make an effort to refocus on this important piece of our role.

We want to focus on encouraging the community to get more civically involved — whether that means showing up to your local government meetings and speaking at public comment on a topic that's important to you or taking it a step further and getting involved in local government or even getting more community members to vote — we are working on ways to include more content centered around this in each publication.

Currently, we're navigating some growing pains as we mature as a publication. One of those civically-minded aspects of maturing is having filed our first public records complaint. This isn't unfamiliar territory to established news media, and it's not new territory to any of our editors. It's an area that I navigated while covering Sauk County government for Capital Newspapers, wading through public records that were handed over well after they should have been.

Our second major New Year's resolution is committing to finding a way to better highlight and include community contributors, especially arts and culture pieces from our community. We're starting the process in the background of figuring out how best to feature the many writings, artwork, prose, poetry, photos and more from local contributors.

We would like to try and find a way to present more of this and really focus on this part of our wonderful community, because we have so many talented individuals in this area. This may include a poetry section or a preview (or review) of live music or something similar. The ideas are endless on how we do this, but we are excited at the prospect of being able to potentially share more prose, poetry and artwork in a little bit of a different way that engages with our community.

It's important to note that these resolutions won't be made overnight and we're only in month 1 of 12 of this arbitrary year. These will be gradual improvements we are working towards, with our mantra here being progress over perfection and our focus being on providing the community with even more resources and information. We may be navigating those growing pains over here, but with your help, support and involvement, we can truly continue to grow into a publication that serves our entire community.

— Nicole Aimone, Editor-in-Chief

Legal Editor's Column: We're suing Lone Rock over public records, here's why

Gary Ernest Grass, esq., *Legal Editor*

Last Halloween the Village of Lone Rock held a public meeting and did not notify the Valley Sentinel. The next night they held public hearings on their annual budget and a village board meeting. The Valley Sentinel was sent an e-mail notice less than an hour before the meeting started. We asked for various public records related to these matters and got nothing. The village clerk told us we were not entitled to notice, and past notices had merely been given as a courtesy.

Now we're suing.

There were lots of reasons for us not to sue. You might think we rushed into this without considering those reasons. If so, you would be wrong.

We know that the ideals of government transparency sound abstract, and it's hard to talk about them without sounding self-righteous and clichéd. In the real world, looking at something at the level of a village, they seem less important. The village says it informed its citizens in other reliable ways, and we have no strong reason to doubt that. They weren't trying to deliberately shut out the media to hide dirty secrets or operate in the dark so they could engage in corruption. It's all local stuff and in small towns if anything were amiss word would get around anyway. So what's the big deal, actually?

Plus, these are not well-paid full time career politicians that run million dollar campaigns to get elected or go on junkets funded by industries seeking to peddle influence. These are our local friends and neighbors who have noble reasons for wanting to get involved. Dragging them into court or making them pay fines will only discourage civil involvement.

All that is true.

Furthermore, the paper is taking a risk that it will alienate local leaders and citizens that it relies upon as sources, readers, and advertisers.

So why?

Because at the end of the day we still consider this a vitally important issue. Because we believe the press has a solemn duty to fight for the principles of transparency, because the law is on our side, and because this is not just an ordinary lapse or mistake, but something far more egregious.

First, recall that this was not just a couple of ordinary meetings and documents. There are meetings and records concerning the village's annual budget. This is one of the most important things that any unit of local government decides, and it has special protection under law. Summaries of proposed budgets are supposed to be made available to the public well in advance, Public hearings are required. Most municipalities are required to

place a paid "Class 1 Notice" in the official paper for the locality. Once set, the budget has a legal force that cannot simply be undone. It restricts spending for the whole year unless special procedures are used to enact changes. So that makes this a much bigger deal than the average meeting.

It is also considered one of the core functions of our transparency laws that the people be able to see how public monies are being spent. In part this comes from the public experience with greed and waste. It would be wrong to think that the only concern is outright corruption. Well meaning people may direct funds to vendors they know not because they're getting some kind of a kickback, but because they honestly think the one they know is the best or only alternative. Opening up the process is a way of making officials aware of appearances of conflict they might overlook, and allowing better alternatives to come to light.

We don't think officials in Lone Rock are crooks, but could greater transparency have benefited them? Well, it's hard for us to say when we can't get most of the records.

Second, the clerk's comment that she believes no notice to the press is required is alarming. Our understanding is that the clerk in Lone Rock, like the clerk in most villages, has been designated the responsibility of sending out notice to the press and the public. Someone in that position should know what is required. She also does not seem to have acknowledged the public's right to inspect or receive public documents. Providing access to government records is described by statute as one of the core responsibilities of public officials. If she believes access to meetings and records is just a courtesy, how many times might she have failed to provide that "courtesy"?

In the case of media notices, it seems like she may be confusing "Public Notice" with notice "to the public," which is admittedly a pretty easy mistake to make. The Wisconsin statutes have a section called "Public Notice" which states that notice must be given to two classes of public media and also directly to the public. (The Valley Sentinel is in one of these classes: media who have requested in advance to be notified of any public meetings.) A section of the law allows notice "to the public" to be provided in various ways, including posting in designated places or online. But this does not discharge the independent duty to inform the media. The legislature thought that informing the press was independently important because the press can play a vital role, not just transmitting the notice to the people, but also looking deeper,

investigating, commenting, bringing out different perspectives and connections. We believe that as well.

Essentially, there are two kinds of mistakes a public official can make with respect to a public duty: first, the duty can be executed imperfectly, or not executed, because of inadvertence or excusable neglect; second, the duty can be rejected altogether, either because the official sees as not being a duty at all. The second is much more serious.

The final factor worth discussing here is that each failure here was, with respect to the Valley Sentinel, absolute or near absolute. Many times people sue over public records because they received most of the records, but not all. They disagree with something being redacted. Copies were not clear. The response was late. They were overcharged. They complain about meeting notices that were late, unclear, or had missing information. There was some effort to comply with the statute, in other words, but there were errors.

In this case, the Valley Sentinel has waited over two months and received no records, and no acknowledgement that any will ever be provided. Under the law, records are to be provided as soon as practicable and without delay. The Department of Justice has long recommended that records be provided within 10 days, or if that is not possible, that the custodian of records send within 10 days an acknowledgement of the request and an estimated time for completion. So it hasn't been a small error, but as far as we can tell, a complete failure or rejection of the law.

Similarly, the Valley Sentinel did not receive late or incomplete notice or the October 31 meeting — we received no notice at all. The notice for the November 1 public hearing and board meeting came less than an hour before the meeting. The standard is 24 hours — two in an emergency. Here, not even one. This is more than a small mistake.

We acknowledged at the outset that talk about the ideals of open government often sounds self-righteous and clichéd, but it is still something we believe in. We think it is integral to the idea of democracy. If our ideal is government by the people, for the people, then government meetings are the people's meetings, and government records are the people's records. Having access to these things is part and parcel of the government not being some external force that we deal with at arm's length, but something that is a part of us, that we do.

We don't think every little mistake merits a lawsuit. But we think with issues this important, we need to be vigilant. And in this case, the violations were far too serious to just ignore.

ON THE COVER

"County line, Lone Rock, Wisconsin" (2023)
Mixed media/digital, by Valley Sentinel/AI/
Public Domain



With the many things going on in Lone Rock and Richland County covered by this edition, we wanted to put together an illustration that created a representation of the issues raised.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,
The UW System has promised a proposal for UW Platteville Richland. This is welcome news, and we are hopeful that they will cooperate with us. However, the annexation of Richland campus to UW Platteville reduced by 55% our financial support from both UW System and UW Platteville. Our Dean's position, a recruiter, 11 of 18 faculty members, Student Services staff, the International Coordinator, the Continuing Education Director—similarly all gone. We've also lost the marketing and strategic plan, and Youth Options and Academic Alliance programs were ended. As one of the UW Colleges, we were the third largest institution within the system, and

especially important for this poor rural area, we had the lowest cost per student for the UW System.

The campus has tremendous community support, including from our Foundation, a leader among all 13 colleges. Being near Madison in a rural setting with a 134-acre campus and a 192-acre wooded and tillable farm for campus use, we are ideally set to be associated with UW Madison's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Nearby are large farms associated with Organic Valley. These features, along with our modern labs on campus, would provide ideal space for research in many areas of agriculture and environmental studies.

Richland Campus has been a hub for

International students since 1986, most of whom started here and transferred to UW Madison. Our faculty and staff all had professional training on how best to support students from different cultures, and the community hosted and mentored them. We brought the USA to them and they brought the world to us.

We have multiple attributes valuable to higher education. The campus is located in a beautiful environment that supports the Wisconsin Idea, exemplifying how all colleges could be revived and offer what the Regents want: affordability and accessibility.

Kay Ziegahn,
Richland Center, Wisconsin