

**Star News
Editorials**

Don't play cute with the public's right to know

"The public is entitled to the fullest and most complete information regarding the affairs of government as is compatible with the conduct of governmental business." Wis. Stat. § 19.81(1).

While lawyers, unions, lobbyists and two-bit politicians may attempt to twist and turn around it, Wisconsin state law is clear in saying that the public has the right to know what its government is doing.

That is why it was disappointing at last Friday's Taylor County Forestry Committee meeting when, coming out of closed session regarding a personnel matter, committee members voted on a motion to approve what they talked about and agreed to in closed session without any further explanation of what that action actually was. If you are going to go on record agreeing to make a decision, you should be willing to own that decision and let the public know what it was rather than leaving citizens guessing.

According to the meeting's posting, the forestry committee was to go into closed session to discuss potential discipline regarding issues with a hotel bill from

a recent state conference held in Rothschild which a county employee attended.

The purpose of having personnel items in closed session is solely to protect the reputations of the employees involved. This makes sense. There isn't anyone who hasn't made a mistake and been called out on it. Getting dressed down by your employer is bad enough without it being made into a public spectacle.

The challenge is that when it comes to government workers in leadership positions, it matters how the oversight committee chooses to resolve the issue. This is especially true with an organization as large and complex as county government. The resolution reached, whether it be a simple clarification of policy or require more severe human resources intervention, sends a message throughout the organization which ideally would help prevent the same type of situation from cropping up elsewhere.

Members of the public, as well as other employees, have been left to speculate about what action the committee took. Was it as simple as denying the

reimbursement for an expense outside the scope of a vaguely worded county policy? Or was there something more?

Considering past instances where county taxpayers ended up paying through the nose on personnel issues, citizens legitimately have a stake in being able to weigh for themselves if the resolution reached was the right call.

There is an old saying among computer programmers, "garbage in, garbage out." This saying emphasizes the need for quality, accurate information going in, in order to guarantee the best results coming out. This applies equally to government bodies making decisions and needing to know the full situation before acting, as it does to members of the general public who judge the actions of those elected officials.

Playing cute with the intent of the open meetings laws by intentionally hiding the action taken by a committee, regardless of what that action may have been, does a disservice to the general public.

Wisconsin needs to roll back restrictions on retirees who want to work

It is time for Wisconsin to roll back restrictions on teachers, police officers and other government employees wishing to go back to work in their professions after retirement.

Prior to July 2, 2013, public employees could retire and then decide to come back to work after retirement. Those workers could receive both their pay earned for the work they were doing and their pension from the Wisconsin Retirement System. This was a common practice at the state, school district, county and municipal levels. Not only did these government employers benefit from the knowledge and experience of veteran staff, but their budgets also benefited because they did not have to pay into the state retirement system for these employees.

The longstanding practice didn't sit well with former Gov. Scott Walker who mischaracterized these employees as "double dipping" since they were getting paid for working at the same time as getting state retirement payments. At the time, Wisconsin was still clawing its way out of a nationwide recession and the number of applicants for teaching and other government positions remained high. The statewide unemployment rates at the time hovered around the 7% mark.

By comparison, the current statewide

unemployment rate is around 2.7% with schools and other government employers facing stiff competition with the private sector for any position. Last fall more than 2,000 teaching positions across the state were unfilled at the start of the school year.

The teacher and other government employee labor shortage has forced up starting wages and benefits packages putting increasing pressure on local budgets and taxpayers.

Under existing rules if a current retired teacher decides to come back to the classroom, they must wait 75 days to do so and are limited to working just 440 hours per calendar year in a public school teaching position while also receiving their retirement benefits. If they work more than that amount, their retirement benefits are put on hold.

It must be noted that there are no restrictions on retired teachers or other government employees from taking private sector jobs while also receiving their state retirement payments. The current rules rob schools and other local governments of the ability of tapping into these highly-qualified workers to fill positions.

It is time for Wisconsin legislators to roll back the Walker-era retirement rules and recognize that during a period of demographically-driven labor shortages it

makes no sense to keep willing workers sidelined. Public employees are able to retire as early as age 50 for law enforcement, and age 55 for others, this is more than a decade earlier than most private sector positions. If these professionals choose to come back to their positions, the rules placed by a past administration should not stand in the way of them

getting paid what they have earned.

Wisconsin's schools and local governments need all hands on deck to continue to provide quality education and essential services at a price that won't break taxpayers' banks. It is time to roll back the Walker-era retirement rule changes and keep Wisconsin working.

Members of *The Star News* editorial board include Publisher Carol O'Leary, General Manager Kris O'Leary and News Editor Brian Wilson.



Star News Quote of the Week:

"Our girls made Rib Lake proud. Not how they played, because they played well, but how they acted as human beings."

— Rollie Thums during the public comment at last week's Rib Lake school board meeting commending the players on the Rib Lake Softball team.
See the full story on page 4

Write a Vox Pop: Vox Pops, from the Latin Vox Populi or Voice of the People, are the opinions of our readers and reflect subjects of current local interest. All letters must be signed and contain the address and telephone number of the writer for verification of authorship and should be the work of the writer. Letters will be edited. No election-related letters will be run the week before the election. E-mail: starnews@centralwinews.com.

The mission of *The Star News*, as a local, community newspaper, is to support democracy by publishing editorials and letters to the editor that stimulate thought and discussion. Due to the ongoing divisiveness following the recent U.S. presidential election, we have decided to put in place a moratorium on editorials and letters that would further inflame partisan rancor and ill-will within our community of readers. We need a period of quiet so we can begin to listen to one another. The newspaper will continue to run editorials addressing issues that have local impact on our communities and readers. *The Star News* welcomes Vox Pops (letters to the editor) from our readers that address local issues and things that we cover in *The Star News*.