



THE LAKELAND TIMES

LET THE SUNSHINE IN
The Lakeland Times grades officials on government openness
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Lac du Flambeau road barricades come down, for now

90-day agreement reached with town and tribe

By **Brian Jopek**
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

The Lac du Flambeau town board and the tribal council of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians formally agreed in the past several days to re-open four roads the tribe had barricaded on Jan. 31.

The reason for the closure was because easements on tribal land por-

tions of the roads have been expired for a decade.

Last Saturday, the Lac du Flambeau town board, after meeting in closed session for nearly an hour, accepted a proposal from the tribe to re-open Annie Sunn Lane, Center Sugarbush Lane, East Ross Allen Lane and Elsie Lake Lane for 90 days.

The motion to accept the proposal

from the tribe "with modifications" to re-open the roads for 90 days for \$60,000 came from town chairman Matt Gaulke, the 90-day period expected to be utilized for meetings between tribal officials, town officials and others involved in the situation, including possibly property owners, to come to a long-term agreement.

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Swearingin helps lead effort on major open records bill

Legislation would upend Supreme Court decision on collecting legal fees

By **Richard Moore**
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

A bill has been introduced to overturn a state Supreme Court decision last year that transparency activists say substantially weakened the state's open government laws by allowing records requesters to collect legal fees only when they prevail in a court decision.

At first blush that might sound reasonable, but, prior to the court ruling, requesters who went to court after a records request was denied or delayed only had to

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TREVOR GREENE/LAKELAND TIMES

A ST. PATRICK'S CELEBRATION

Volunteers, from left, Al Strasburg, DJ Lindsey, Ron Magan and Father Maria Joseph Kodiganti serve corned beef, potatoes, carrots and cabbage to patrons during an early St. Patrick's Day celebration on Sunday, March 12, at St. Anthony's Catholic Church in Lac du Flambeau.

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Vilas County: Land & Water Conservation Committee violated open meetings law

Quorum gathered at hazardous wake regulation workshop without proper notice

News and analysis

By **Richard Moore**
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

The Vilas County corporation counsel acknowledged this week that the county's land and water conservation committee violated the state's open meetings laws when a quorum of its members gathered at a March 8 workshop on hazardous wake regulation that was not properly noticed to the public. That workshop — designed to assist

municipalities in crafting ordinances to regulate the use of wake boats — has raised other questions, including why wake boat manufacturers and boat dealers who might oppose regulations or have ideas about what those regulations might be were intentionally not invited to participate in the workshop.

Corporation counsel Jack Albert made the open meetings determination after finding that the department had prepared a notice but never posted or dis-

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Late winter snowfall could affect deer herd numbers

By **Beckie Gaskill**
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

The Winter Severity Index is one of the metrics used by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and County Deer Advisory Committees (CDACs) to help determine the likely health of the deer herd. This is one of the metrics and, in the northern parts of the state, one of the most impor-

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SUNSHINE WEEK

YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW

In honor of Sunshine Week — a celebration and advocacy of open government — The Lakeland Times presents the newspaper's 2023 awards and grades for openness in conducting public business.

The following grades are calculated using several measures, including how responsive officials have been this past year to open records' requests, how diligently they have strived to keep the workings of government open, how willing they were to communicate with the media and with the public, as well as their past track record.

The rating scale:

A — Excellent. Passionately committed to open government and accountability. The public is lucky to have these officials. They have full knowledge of the open records' and open meetings' laws.

B — Good. These records' custodians do an above-aver-

age job. They may need more knowledge and education about the law but are committed in principle to openness and side more often than not with open-records' advocates.

C — Average. These custodians need more immediate education about open government laws. They tend to respond slowly to records' requests, and they are as likely to withhold information as to release it. Still, these officials have never landed in court over an open records' dispute.

D — Below Average. These custodians do not believe in open government or in the release of open records. They usually land on the side of secrecy. These officials are suspicious of the public. They have very little knowledge of the open records' and open meetings' laws, and have even less interest in learning about them.

F — Failure. These people

HALL OF FAME

Vilas County circuit court judge Neal A. "Chip" Nielsen

Judge Nielsen has retired now, but his presence will always loom large in the field of open government. His was a lifetime record of consistency in supporting transparency, and we have never seen a public official match it.

While we do not expect to see his record equaled any time soon — though we certainly hope it will be — it is enough for now to say that all public officials should study judge Nielsen's record in open government as a model for their own conduct.

In several rulings, judge Nielsen articulated the principle of open government better than we ever could:

"In a democracy, or a democratic republic, certain principles are of paramount concern to ensure the sustainability of that form of government. In a government of, by, and for the people, there must be maintained a requisite degree of transparency. That is, people must be able to see how effectively their government functions. And there must be a free press, the Fourth Estate, as it has been called, in addition to the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government to examine the workings of those branches and to inform the public of matters that are of importance to ensure that the government works as intended and that the rights and indeed the best interests of its citizens are respected and promoted."



Nielsen

Sunshine Week 2023

should be removed as records' custodians. They cannot be trusted by the public and couldn't spell FREEDOM if you spotted them F-R-E-E-_-O-M.

Consider them wanted posters in the post office of public records.

I — Incomplete. While it is too early to rate an overall performance in their current positions, we will record any recent actions and use their track records to calculate a "trending" rank.

PLATINUM — THE BEST OF THE BEST

Oneida County sheriff Grady Hartman

Oneida County sheriff Grady Hartman is not only one of the most transparent public officials in Oneida County but in the state. He excels not just in the law enforcement category for openness but across the spectrum of public officials.

It's not just that the sheriff is transparent and open. He is that, of course. For instance, the department continues to fulfill our open records requests promptly, and the department was a strong and positive voice in advocating for Oneida County's recent reform of open records laws. He has also been a long-time advocate for adding requirements that records custodians attend open records training within their orientation period and stay up-to-date with new open records case law.

More than that, Hartman is courageous in his defense of open government laws. He does not hesitate to call out his fellow county officials when he believes they have transgressed upon those laws, and, what's more, no one should ever forget the sheriff's department's 2019 raid on Rhinelander City Hall, prompted by an open records complaint filed by the Northwoods River News. We called it a courageous action to defend the integrity of our democratic institutions, and it was.

As we wrote in an editorial then, "They did not execute those warrants to find evidence of mid-management embezzlement. They did not enter the building to find a politician engaged in contract fraud or in dealing or buying drugs or who was committing election crimes. Rather, they entered the building to protect the people's right to access the information the people own, and to be confident that information has not been altered."

The outcome of that case was not what transparency advocates wanted for what was clearly outrageous con-

duct, but the outcome itself was not what was important. What was important is that, when probable cause that a crime had been committed presented itself, the sheriff's department acted to find out if that was the case, to enforce the open government laws that might have been broken. That's a rarity in this age, and a welcome one.

The citizens of Oneida County are very fortunate to have a sheriff who takes the open government laws seriously and investigates when there are violations.

But don't take our word for it. This past year, Hartman was honored with the Wisconsin Newspaper Association's inaugural Sunshine in Government award. The award, launched by the WNA Board of Directors, recognizes efforts by Wisconsin citizens and public officials to protect and strengthen open government.



Hartman

A+

Oneida County clerk Tracy Hartman

Oneida County clerk Tracy Hartman continues to run an efficient and open office and to go the extra mile to provide helpful links and suggestions about the information requested within her purview, not just for media but for the general public. We've said it before but we'll say it again: Hartman's greatest strength is fairness. The same degree of transparency and service is given to all who seek it, as it should be. In her office, it's not who you are that gets results.



Hartman

Minocqua town clerk Roben Haggart

As always, Roben Haggart has demonstrated to us — and we believe to the general public — what a good town clerk should be.

In addition to advising the town board when necessary, she has also been excellent about answering and fulfilling our open records requests in a timely manner. This year Haggart was better than ever in her commitment to transparency. When she has received open records requests from us, she not only has made sure



Haggart

they were delivered in timely fashion, but she was pro-active in helping us get the records we needed and asked for. She put in extra effort, in fact, more than her job required, to be a good steward of openness. It's a trait she shares, by the way, with Oneida County clerk Tracy Hartman.

A

Oneida County Planning and Development Committee

In just two weeks, a public hearing will be held on revised shoreland ordinance amendments that the zoning committee has crafted over the past year or so. The amendments themselves are the result of an open and transparent committee seeking public input.

For example, when the committee learned that area landscapers had concerns about the ordinance, it promptly held a meeting at which close to 100 people attended. Then, responding to the public, the committee worked transparently to develop the proposed ordinance amendments — revising them based on public input and study.

To be sure, the committee is ever watchful that public input is not short-circuited. That leads to sometimes slow but methodical work on ordinance amendments, but that also gives the language time to stew and to be revisited by the committee and the public, all with multiple public hearings, if more than one is needed.

We also applaud the committee for not giving more favor to the giant DNR bureaucracy than it gives to the public. The DNR always tries to bully its way into having its viewpoint get preferential treatment. In the case of the ordinance amendments, committee chairman Scott Holewinski told the agency to get in line with everybody else and present its viewpoint at the public hearing.

DNR transparency is needed more than ever, especially in Oneida County. The DNR right now is making a huge regulatory push in northern Wisconsin, seeking perpetual easements to lock away our land in government hands forever, and it is crafting its own new comprehensive pier rules. It's critical that the public has both the time and the access to fully participate in the decision-making process, and this committee has stayed the course to make sure that the residents of Oneida County are fully informed on planning and development issues.

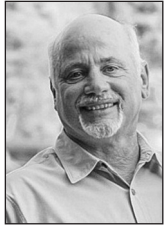
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Grades

From page 12

Oneida County board chairman Scott Holewinski

We again single out board chairman Holewinski for his consistent individual commitment to open government.



Holewinski

He has always signaled an inherent distaste for closed meetings except when absolutely necessary. Year before last, for instance, Holewinski was a leader of an effort by supervisors to object to then chairman Dave Hintz's bid to move the county board into closed session to discuss open government issues. Yes, that's right, Hintz wanted to discuss in secret the county's ongoing problems with secrecy, which, in a nutshell, summarized that problem.

But Holewinski led the objections and stopped it. He is a breath of fresh air compared to Hintz, especially on transparency. It is refreshing to receive actual documents you can read instead of fully redacted and black-blotted papers. It is literally the difference between black and white, which is also the difference between Holewinski and Hintz, between transparency and secrecy.

State Rep. Rob Swearingen

State Rep. Rob Swearingen (R-Rhineland) again



Swearingen

scores an excellent Sunshine Week grade, this year in particular for co-authoring legislation that will rectify a terrible state Supreme Court decision on public records.

Last year (see related story), the high court overturned precedent by requiring that someone who files an open records lawsuit can only collect legal fees by prevailing in court. That allows a government to stall and delay the release of requested records until a requester files a lawsuit, then simply turn over the requested record without having to pay legal costs incurred by the requester.

This bill would alter the statutory definition of "prevail" to allow courts to award attorney fees in instances where records are released only because the requester filed a lawsuit to get the records.

Swearingen also continues to be one of the most responsive legislators when asked for records, and we praise him, too, for his past support of a bill to give small businesses that purchase advertising in local media outlets a 50-percent tax credit.

Under the bill, the tax credit would be capped at \$5,000 and would expire after five years. Businesses with fewer than 100 full-time employees and less than \$10 million in revenue would have been eligible to receive

the credit and ads would have to be placed with Wisconsin-based media, including newspapers, radio, television stations and online news sites.

It's still a good idea. Local businesses best reach their target markets through local advertising, and the tax credit is a good way to boost that marketing while helping to sustain the local journalism that is critical to the survival of transparency.

When it comes to open government, Swearingen gets it.

Vilas County sheriff Joe Fath

Over the course of every year, a newspaper staff will require interactions with local law enforcement probably more than with any other type of agency, simply because of the nature of our business. There is a lot more crime — and a lot more public interest in crime — than there is in land information mapping.



Fath

All of which is to say that getting the news requires not merely transparent but cooperative law enforcement. Fortunately, we are blessed to have in the Lakeland area two sheriffs who are both transparent and cooperative. We have graded sheriff Grady Hartman already, but we also want to give kudos to Vilas County sheriff Joe Fath.

Sheriff Fath is as accessible as they come, and always ready to deliver appropriate records to the public. Beyond that, Fath will take the time to give his reasoning of certain events, and he will point to research he has studied that has helped to guide his thinking.

All in all, it's good to have a responsive and accessible sheriff; it's even better to have a sheriff who will share his knowledge of developing and ongoing matters with the media and the public, and point to pathways for further education.

Sheriff Joe Fath fits the bill.

Zoning director Karl Jennrich

Mr. Jennrich stays in the rarified air of those officials who believe in transparency and openness. There aren't many of them. The rest live in the swamps of suppressed information, drinking rat water. After a serious misstep on transparency year before last, we declared it an aberration last year and moved on. The past year has proven us right. Mr. Jennrich remains accessible and quick to fulfill requests and an utterly responsive public official.



Jennrich

State Sen. Van Wanggaard

State Sen. Van Wanggaard (R-Racine) earns an 'A' for unveiling and working hard to pass the "Parole Transparency Act," which he says is an effort to improve the transparency and efficiency of the state parole commission and to ensure

that victims can be involved and have knowledge of the parole process.

Because so few in the legislature ever act on anything to do with transparency, when a lawmaker does take action, it should be rewarded.

The Parole Transparency Act (PTA) would eliminate the commission's exemption to the Wisconsin's open meetings law. The PTA also requires the commission to post notice of its meetings on the Department of Corrections internet site, and post guidance documents used by the commission when making parole determinations. The commission must also post monthly and annual totals of persons granted and denied parole, and those who have had parole revoked. The annual totals must also be presented by crime, sex, race, age of the individual and locality in which the individuals were convicted.

Trying to find out what's been going on has been exceedingly difficult, Wanggaard said.

"The commission has been operating in the shadows," the senator said. "Stonewalling of records requests, sidestepping and violating open meeting laws, and violating the constitutional rights of crime victims has to stop. The Parole Transparency Act sheds light on the parole-granting process while still maintaining the privacy rights of inmates."

State Sen. Chris Larson

If you comb through the legislature, you will be hard pressed to find a true supporter of open records. It's safe to say that because, if there were authentic open records advocates in that body, the legislature would have eliminated its exemption of itself from the open records retention law, which effectively exempts the legislature from the open records law.

To wit, the record in a lawmaker's hands might be public if you ask for it before he or she shreds it, but if said lawmaker shreds it before it is asked for, that's OK. Without the retention requirement, the open records law is toothless.

Enter Sen. Chris Larson (D-Milwaukee). Session after session now, including the 2021-22 session, he introduced a bill to place the legislature under the records retention law. And session after session, the bill keeps getting buried — doesn't even receive a public hearing — no matter which party is in power.

We hope he keeps trying. And because standing up for principle matters, he gets an 'A' in our book.

Sen. John Kennedy

It's not often that we single out a federal lawmaker from another state, but we make an exception this year



Wanggaard

SUNSHINE WEEK
YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW ®

for Sen. John Kennedy, who has courageously pursued legislation to bring more transparency to the U.S. Supreme Court.



Kennedy

There's no question it's needed, as the justices hand down bad decision after bad decision when it comes to transparency, all the while without having to disclose much or anything at all about their own court expenditures and funding.

To remedy that, Kennedy (R-Louisiana) has for several years pursued his Supreme Court Transparency Act, which would increase public access to Supreme Court justices' financial and ethics disclosures. It would provide the public with a level of transparency similar to that of the legislative branch.

"The legislative branch makes a great deal of information publicly available to those who elect them," Kennedy said. "Supreme Court justices serve lifetime appointments and should provide a similar level of transparency to Americans as the lawmakers who serve at the Capitol. The Supreme Court Transparency Act would make it easier for Americans to access the Supreme Court justices' disclosure reports. The public deserves to have great confidence in all its public servants, and my bill would strengthen that confidence by expanding transparency to every justice on the bench."

Kennedy said it can take years for the public to gain access to requested public information from the Supreme Court, including the disclosure of various financial and ethics records.

The legislation would require the establishment of an internet database enabling public access to any ethics, personal finance or disclosure reports for Supreme Court justices required by

federal law. It would also add the Supreme Court justices to the list of government officials who must comply with section 103(l) of the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, which requires the prompt disclosure of certain real estate and securities transactions.

Kennedy has also aggressively sought the records related to the travel of the justices, who frequently fly for free. Kennedy said it is vital to know who is subsidizing justices' flights because those donors could be involved in cases that come before the high court.

U.S. Rep. Tom Tiffany

Rep. Tom Tiffany (R-Wisconsin-7) hasn't acted on any



Tiffany

matters directly relating to open government, at least that we are aware of, but he has done an outstanding job in letting the sun shine in on what is going on at the nation's southern border, or what used to be called our southern border.

Tiffany has been a constant voice for more transparency, too, when it comes to vetting Afghan refugees coming in through the borders and he has worked ahead to cast a light on the growing problem of drugs and the problem of human trafficking.

He has raised awareness on these and other issues, and gets a good grade for furthering the free flow of information to and from American citizens.

Boulder Junction Town Board

In 2016, the Boulder Junction town board found itself under fire by the Times when the newspaper reported the town board at the time had taken action in closed session to approve a salary increase for the town clerk at the time, Kendra

Grades

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Moraczewski.

That involved an investigation by the Vilas County Sheriff's Office and the county attorney at the time, Martha Milanowski.

Moraczewski ended up paying the town back.

All that happened following the purchase of a tractor the town board hadn't formally approved in a meeting and hadn't budgeted for.

Dennis Reuss, first elected to the town board in 2011 and town chairman in 2016, is still town chairman.

Our "Sunshine Week" grade for Boulder Junction in 2017 was an F.

Since then, things have changed drastically in Boulder Junction as far as keeping things transparent and open as a few years ago, former Vilas County emergency management director Jim Galloway and Laura Bertch were elected as town supervisors and Dan Driscoll elected as clerk.

We just thought we'd add Boulder Junction here as an example of what a town that at one time had some major problems from an open meeting/open record standpoint and even budgetary standpoint, can do to rectify things.

In so doing, of course, going from the worst to among one of the better town governments in the area from that open meeting/open records standpoint.

Lac du Flambeau town chairman Matt Gaulke

As of this writing, there's a very controversial situation involving four roads in the town of Lac du Flambeau, a situation involving the town, the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians and title insurance companies representing landowners on those four roads.

The tribe contends, and no one has denied it, at least in public to our knowledge, that easements on tribal property involving portions of those roads expired at least a decade ago.

The tribe on Jan. 31 barricaded the roads, leaving several of the property owners stuck in the middle of the dispute between the tribe the town and the title insurance companies.

Monday, tribal president John Johnson, Sr., announced the tribe and the town had reached agreement to get the barricades lifted for a 90-day period to provide time to get a long-term settlement reached.

The town paid the tribe \$60,000 from the road department portion of its 2023 budget.

Through all this, and we, of course, don't know where things will end up, Gaulke, along with town clerk Nancy Edwards and deputy clerk Susan Schoonover, has been very forthcoming with providing information and documents, some of it the subject of open records requests by the Times.

Gaulke was dinged by the Times a few years ago, a primary reason being he didn't allow public comment at town board meetings at the time.

He wasn't required to allow it; there's nothing in Wisconsin state statute that says he needs to.

We just felt it was a way to keep the public better informed and Gaulke has since made public comment part of regular meeting agendas.

In the current road tiff with the tribe, he's maintained that openness with the Times as the two sides really go to work to resolve the issue.

The Minocqua town board's ad hoc committee on labor and housing

This committee was formed in the fall of 2022 by the Minocqua town board in an effort to gather information to really examine issues facing the Minocqua area in relation to the shortage of affordable housing as well as a labor shortage and what it could mean for Minocqua and the surrounding area in not just the future but now. The committee has been successful in doing that by "doing that," we mean areas that need to be addressed have been identified, some of them unexpectedly.

For example, the lack of child care for working parents has received a major spot in the "limelight" as we feel it should; child care, as it has for decades now, makes up even a larger chunk of expenditures for a young family than it used to.

We will hope that when the ad hoc committee's work is completed and the information handed over to the Minocqua town board, it will be utilized to everyone's benefit.

Vilas County clerk Kim Olkowski

It's been nearly a year since long-time county clerk Dave Alleman retired and Olkowski, who was deputy clerk for several years before Alleman's retirement, had some pretty big shoes to fill.

From a media standpoint, we think she's doing quite nicely.

Administrative and secretarial staff members for boards of education at the Minocqua Hazelhurst Lake Tomahawk, Arbor Vitae-Woodruff, North Lakeland and Lac du Flambeau school districts

From district superintendents to administrative and school board secretaries, we have no issues at this time with how they provide the Times with information when asked.

The Vilas County board's corporation counsel, John "Jack" Albert

Albert attends most meetings of the Vilas County board and told the Times he attends committee meetings when possible to provide legal advice, whether it's procedural or a question of possible litigation.

Most importantly to us, he's a big believer in transparency, as was his predecessor, Martha Milanowski, who is now a Vilas County circuit court judge.

St. Germain town board

Once again, town supervisors, town clerk, and town treasurer of St. Germain have earned top marks for their commitment to transparency and open government.

All of St. Germain's elected officials have been thoroughly cooperative again this year with the Times in making themselves available for interviews and providing documents when requested to do so.

Emails and phone calls are typically returned within an hour and town officers frequently take time away from their day-jobs to answer press inquiries.

The board also goes above-and-beyond in allowing public access to governance.

It's the board's policy to field questions and comments from anyone in attendance — either in-person or via Zoom — at any point during meetings, so long as a motion is not on the floor.

Anyone is allowed to speak; residents, non-residents and members of the press.

This policy often results in hours-long meetings and a good deal of tedium but no questions are left unanswered and no opinions go unheard.

If a bit of tedium is the price of transparency and openness, officials and residents of St. Germain are willing to pay it.

This is well beyond the requirements of state statute, which only mandates a "public comment" time at the beginning of government meetings, during which officials are not required to answer questions and almost never reply to comment.

The board also goes above-and-beyond the requirements of statute in its policy of ordinance adoption. Wisconsin law mandates any new or amended zoning ordinances must be published twice in a local newspaper and subject to a public hearing before being adopted.

In St. Germain, any proposed ordinance or amendment is published twice and goes to a public review and comment session before being voted upon.

Technically, these meetings are not public hearings, but are instead a chance for anyone with an opinion to get it on-record and technically, the ordinances in question are those which contain forfeiture provisions as opposed to those regulating board policies and procedures.

No resident of St. Germain can say "This passed behind closed doors" or "the town board pulled a fast one on us."

Anyone who makes those claims simply wasn't paying attention.

When it comes to transparency and openness, other government bodies in



the region should look to the example being set consistently in St. Germain.

Manitowish Waters town board

Town chairman John Hanson is a dedicated public servant who takes his commitment to local government very seriously.

He can usually be reached by calling the town's landline, and is always willing to take the time to answer any questions from the press.

Town supervisors Bob Becker and Mike Kramer are easy to approach and willing to answer any questions as well.

Outgoing town clerk/treasurer Dana Hilbert and her replacement, Jessie Knipp, seem to always do their best to get the media any answers they need, too, even if they have to go out of their way to do it.

The Crescent town board

We feel town chairman Joel Knutson and town clerk Tracy Hartman are up front and honest when it comes to answering questions from the Times.

Knutson fields questions with a certain sense of enthusiasm, while Hartman, who is also the Oneida County clerk, is there to help with any questions, concerns or records as her busy schedule permits.

The Newbold town board

Long-time town chairman Dave Kroll, who will be retiring from the board following his current term, leads by example. Town clerk Kim Gauthier does too.

When Gauthier noticed discrepancies in former town supervisor Jim Staskiewicz's nomination papers, she contacted Kroll and the two passed the information onto the Oneida County district attorney's office.

Even though Kroll has served with Staskiewicz for more than a decade on the board, he didn't flinch when it came to doing the right

thing. He also didn't flinch when the media asked him questions about it.

Like usual, Kroll answered his phone on the first couple of rings and gave his thoughts on the matter freely. He was also quick to "address the elephant in the room" at the board's Feb. 9 meeting, where he announced Staskiewicz's resignation.

The rest of the board, including town supervisors Dan Hess, Mike McKenzie and Mike Sueflohn, always answer the media's requests as well.

The Presque Isle town board

Town clerk Lorine Walters significantly helps the town board's grade as she always answers her phone to answer any questions and usually has the unofficial meeting minutes posted to the town's website agenda link in real time — as the meeting is occurring — for anyone and everyone to see.

Town chairman John MacLean and town supervisor Cathy Logan Weber both are quick to answer the phone when called with questions.

It seems, as well, they both answer questions to the best of their ability.

Lakeland Union High School board of education and administration

Without asking, board packets with information the school board members look at and consider during a meeting are provided by school board secretary Lisa Kennedy.

First-year district administrator Bob Smudde takes the district's transparency very seriously and isn't afraid to answer questions asked of him.

Principal Chad Gauerke and assistant principle Levi Massey make themselves easily accessible.

Grades

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B+ B

Oneida County corporation counsel Michael Fugle

In his now more than a year as the corporation counsel, Brian Desmond's successor has proven that he is not the evil offspring of Demonic Desmond after all. You can't be too sure these days.



Fugle

We give him a B+ by reiterating some of what we said last year: Fugle makes himself accessible and returns calls, and he takes the time to reason and communicate with the public.

Last year, too, in a major open records request in which the newspaper asked for all the records pertaining to the Peter Wegner saga, the corporation counsel — along with county clerk Tracy Hartman — gathered and released all the records, excepting appropriate redactions, in a reasonable period of time. There were no long letters using legal poison and gobbledygook sentences, and no pages that were completely blacked out, as there were with Demonic Desmond.

Just this week, too, Fugle struck a blow for openness by advising the county's land conservation committee to postpone a discussion of materials the department included in supervisors' meeting packets related to proposed revisions to the shoreland ordinance. The conservation department had indicated on the department website that the controversial materials would be discussed at the meeting. The problem is, the official meeting notice and agenda listed nothing about any such discussion, only an umbrella topic on the general subject of the proposed original revisions.

At first Fugle said the generic umbrella item was OK and gave the green light for the committee to discuss it. *The Lakeland Times* protested and made our argument to the corporation counsel. At the meeting, Fugle said there were good arguments on both sides but advised the committee to postpone discussion until the next committee meeting when the agenda could be specific enough to leave no doubt.

Now that's a corporation counsel listening to all sides and taking a reasonable approach. In the old days under Demonic Desmond, it would have been his way and the high-

way and the county likely would have wound up in expensive litigation, never mind the impeachment of the people's rights. Night and day.

Oneida County supervisor Billy Fried

It's been a quiet year on the open records front for Oneida County supervisor Billy Fried, but he remains a solid and consistent voice for open government, with a few flaws, such as his advocacy not too long ago for an emergency procedure that would allow the county board chairman to bypass the county board to approve "emergency" requests — such as increased staffing levels — for the public health department during a pandemic.



Fried

Still, while worth noting, that position does not degrade Fried's overall commitment to transparency.

Oneida County district attorney Michael Schiek

While we have not always seen eye-to-eye with Oneida County district attorney Michael Schiek on matters of open government, we have been heartened by his interest in prosecuting open government violations over the past couple of years, not to mention that he is accessible, as are his records. We hope Schiek continues to embrace the willingness to prosecute those who don't think transparency laws are a big deal, or, if he is elected judge, to honor the principles of transparency in his work on the bench.



Schiek

Doing so consistently sends a huge message to would-be lawbreakers and could significantly strengthen open government at the grassroots level.

Minocqua plan commission/Minocqua town board

In last year's "Sunshine Week" grades, both the town plan commission and the town board received incompletes; there were some serious questions about some of what had been going on in the year or so before that.

One example for concern was town supervisors John Thompson and Brian Fricke going on social media and communicating about what at the time was the town's proposed purchase of the Campanile

parking lot, leading to the perception the decision was already a done deal before it was.

Possible open meetings violations brought to their attention by the *Times* resulted in things settling down and Thompson, Fricke and members of the plan commission behaving more like town representatives the people can expect them to be.

Woodruff town clerk Julie Huotari/Woodruff town board

We probably could have gone with an A for Huotari this time around if it weren't for a little glitch during the town's budget approval process.



Huotari

The town board conducted its budget hearing for its 2023 budget on Nov. 15.

Following the public hearing, the town adopted the 2023 budget.

The problem is the public hearing portion of the budget meeting, by state law, has to be published in the newspaper of record, in this case, the *Times* and, as it turned out, that didn't happen.

Subsequently, the necessity by Wisconsin state law to publish the public hearing notice for the town budget in the newspaper of record was brought to the attention of Huotari and town chairman Mike Timmons by the *Times* and the town board re-did everything on Dec. 7, 2023.

"We did this meeting on Nov. 15 ... there was some confusion with state statutes, some publishing and posting between the two meetings (budget hearing and electors meeting) prior to our town board meeting," Timmons said at the start of the Dec. 7 meeting. "The town board meeting ... everything was done properly but we're redoing everything on the side of caution and we're gonna go forward and do it all over."

We'll see how things go in the next year and see if the grade can't get bumped up.

Hazelhurst town board

The only thing we'd like to see from Hazelhurst at this point is more information by way of contacts for town officials; long-time town chairman Ted Cushing, also a long-time member of the Oneida County board including a stint as county board chairman at one point, is listed in the phone book which is good.

The town's website, however, doesn't list any of the contact information for any of the board members or the clerk or treasurer.

Maybe we're just spoiled but most other towns in the area have all their town officials listed with contact information.

We think that could help Hazelhurst quite a bit not just with those of us in the press but with the people who really matter; constituents in the town of Hazelhurst.



SUNSHINE WEEK

YOUR RIGHT TO KNOW

C

The U.S. Supreme Court

As we pointed out above in Sen. John Kennedy's grade, the Supreme Court pretty much evades all accountability when it comes to its finances and backers. Private donors routinely bestow upon them lavish gifts such as free plane trips and hotels. This should stop because of the possibility — and in some cases, the likelihood — that some of those donors end up arguing a case before the court.

Having said that, the high court did take some tentative steps toward transparency and liberty during the pandemic, particularly opposing the large employer mandate that would have required private companies that employ 100 or more people to implement vaccine mandates or testing alternatives. That decision to stay was based on the court's findings that the Occupational Safety and Health Act only "empowers [OSHA] to set workplace safety standards, not broad public health measures ... untethered, in any causal sense, from the workplace."

Otherwise, the court stated, OSHA would have limitless power over the personal health decisions of any American who works for a private company.

That ruling was just of many that continued the court's rollback of due deference to federal agencies and to look more closely at what federal agencies do and why they do it. That might not seem connected to open government, but it most certainly is. Any time the court decides to probe an agency's internal workings, it opens a window for the public to see inside and, to use a phrase, to let the sunshine in. With decisions like

these, the court is helping us see how federal agencies are operating.

State Sen. Mary Felzkowski

There's no ignoring or forgiving all the disastrous open government policies that state Sen. Mary Felzkowski has embraced over the years — unless she would change her mind on those policies, which we have no indication of — but we can commend her for her courage and transparency in fighting the proposed DNR purchase of a conservation easement in the Pelican River Forest.



Felzkowski

The issue here is not so much her opposition to that purchase but her transparency in fighting for her position. Felzkowski was one of at least four lawmakers on the legislature's Joint Finance Committee to object to the project, thereby blocking it.

However, she was the only lawmaker who acknowledged that she was one of the objecting lawmakers. In these situations, members of the JFC can object to a purchase or project without having to say who they are. They are given an effective pocket veto without any public transparency. Gov. Tony Evers has proposed that that anonymity be prohibited in the future, and we agree with him on that.

Though she could have cowered in anonymity, Felzkowski acknowledged her action publicly. She chose transparency and principle over political cowardice, and in so doing serves as a role model in transparency for her fellow lawmakers and the public. That deserves a significant upgrade to her ranking.

Grades

From page 15

F

Vilas County Land & Water Conservation department/committee

On March 8, the department conducted a workshop at the Boulder Junction community center.

There's an article elsewhere in this edition of *The Lakeland Times* that delves more into the technicalities here but suffice it to say, according to a statement to the *Times* from Vilas County corporation counsel John "Jack" Albert, the "stated purpose of this workshop was ... to offer guidance to town supervisors, town lakes committees, lake district commissioners, and lake association board members who feel there may be a need to regulate hazardous wakes within their township or municipality through local ordinances."

The fact the meeting, or workshop, was conducted by Vilas County and included presenters from the county, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, The Last Wilderness Alliance, the town of Presque Isle, the town of Manitowish Waters and Wisconsin Lakes and didn't include any opportunity for those on the other side of the wake boat issue to make a presentation is a whole other part of the problem here as the article elsewhere in today's *Times* will show.

Albert said in his statement there was an official meeting notice drafted and approved for posting, otherwise known in this case as a "quorum notice," something, as has been our experience, Vilas County government as a whole is historically pretty good about.

However, Albert said that notice "was inadvertently not posted with the media or any of the normal recipients" for meeting notices "pursuant to the Wisconsin Open Meetings Law."

"A quorum of the Land & Water Conservation Committee of Vilas County was present at this workshop, and the topic was one that could normally be discussed at a regular meeting of said Committee."

Speaking of quorum notices, or the lack thereof, we know all three members of the Manitowish Waters town board were present for this workshop, which required an RSVP from participants.

We have a problem with the RSVP thing too, when it comes to open meetings conducted and hosted by a public entity like a committee and department of Vilas County government.

To his credit, Albert did his job as the county's corporation counsel and checked into the background of this workshop and issued his statement, "falling on the sword," as it were.

Manitowish Waters town board

While we're on the subject of this Vilas County land and water conservation workshop, we're going to give the three member Manitowish Waters town board who attended the March 8 meeting in Boulder Junction with no quorum notice issued by the town clerk a failing grade.

Attorney general Josh Kaul

Wow, even the progressives are done with state attorney general Josh Kaul when it comes to open records.

Just recently the liberal Wisconsin Examiner published a scathing rebuke of Kaul and the DOJ on transparency, observing that the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) has more than three dozen pending open records requests that have remained unfulfilled for more than a year.

"The backlog of requests has caused wait times to grow for newer requests," the newspaper wrote. "It also has open government advocates worried about the consequences for transparency when the agency responsible for interpreting and enforcing Wisconsin's public records and open meetings laws is itself struggling to keep up."

According to The Examiner, the DOJ's Office of Open Government, which is responsible for responding to open records requests and answering public inquiries about the interpretation of open government laws, reported that in 2022 the agency received a record-high 924 public records requests — beating the previous record by 100.

While the Wisconsin Public Records Law Compliance Guide states that 10 working days is a "reasonable time" for responding to a simple request, The Examiner reported that DOJ responded to 46 percent of records requests within that 10-day guideline. The median response time, the report found, was 18 calendar days.

As of February 27, The Examiner's analysis of agency records showed 171 requests older than 10 business days, while 41 requests have been pending for more than a year.

Of course, Kaul took the cake for too-clever-by-an-ethical-mile when he denied an open records request for documents because he said they were subject to attorney client-privilege. Only thing is, Kaul and the DOJ were just acting as attorneys for a client, which, as it turns out, Kaul and the DOJ were also the client. As the National Review put it, "In other words, the DOJ claimed the right to refuse open-records requests on behalf of itself. It's like the constitution 'pleading the Fifth' on itself, to itself. If the DOJ is its own client and can assert a privilege to avoid turning over documents, there is little (other than judicial challenges) stopping it from skirting Wisconsin's open

records laws."

Josh Kaul likes to talk about transparency, but he only likes transparency when it benefits him. He is a failure as an advocate for open government, which makes a complete failure as attorney general.

Wisconsin Counties Association, Wisconsin Towns Association, Wisconsin League of Municipalities, Wisconsin Association of School Boards

Every year, we call for these four special interest organizations — Wisconsin Counties Association, Wisconsin Towns Association, Wisconsin League of Municipalities, and Wisconsin Association of School Boards — to be subjected to the open government laws, where applicable, and to be required to stop using taxpayer dollars to lobby for their special-interest causes.

These groups are quite clear about who they represent: not the citizens of counties, towns, municipalities, or school districts, but the institutional government of counties, towns, municipalities and school districts.

As such, they often advocate for things that institutional interests desire, such as higher taxes, but that citizens don't, and they often cajole elected boards to go along. What's worse, they use tax dollars — paid for as membership fees from elected bodies — to lobby against taxpayer interests.

One of those things they lobby for is more secretive government. These groups have all put great time and effort into various bids to end the requirement that public notices be published in newspapers, for instance.

On the federal level lobbying by government agencies is outlawed; these units of government are essentially state agencies by virtue of their relationship to state government, and they shouldn't be lobbying, either. When they do, they are almost certain not to lobby for the people so much as for the public officials themselves. That's why they formed an interest group for themselves, and that means they'll be lobbying for ever more secrecy, as they did with the public-notice legislation.

Even worse, the WCA has successfully challenged in court that the open-records law doesn't apply to such entities as WTA and the WCA.

That is preposterous. As the lobbying and educational arms of government interests, these organizations are by definition conducting public business when they lobby for legislation supported by those local governments.

Any other interpretation renders the very notion of public business superfluous and meaningless.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court

Last year, open government advocates were reeling from a ruling by the Wisconsin Supreme Court that let stand Oneida County judge Michael Bloom's absurd rewriting of the open records law in a walking quorum case brought by *Lakeland Times* general manager Heather Holmes.

In his ruling, Bloom took it



Kaul



upon himself to rewrite the definition of government business to mean "discussion, decision or information gathering" — and here's his freelance addition to the statute — that ultimately requires a formal vote of the governmental body.

That's right, the judge ruled that, as long you don't take a vote, a government body just getting together to discuss government "topics" within its jurisdiction isn't government business at all and doesn't have to be noticed to the public.

Bloom's absurd conclusion now stands, and that means government business isn't really government business unless it involves a specific proposal requiring a vote by a governing body.

Then, with everybody still reeling from that ruling, the state Supreme Court struck again this past year, ruling that a records requester who has gone to court in an open records case must win an outright legal victory to capture any legal fees and court costs.

Prior to the court ruling, requesters who went to court after a records request was denied or delayed only had to show that the record custodian subsequently released a record because a lawsuit was filed and influenced the decision to release the record.

In that situation, even though the lawsuit was over because the record was released, the requester could still collect legal fees. If that happens now, there is no final disposition in court, and so the records requester cannot collect legal fees.

Critics of the Supreme Court ruling say government custodians can deliberately forestall fulfilling a request, compelling requesters to go to court, and, if they do, simply release the record without penalty. It's an incentive to stall and delay the release of records, hoping that most people won't go the extra mile to file a lawsuit but knowing it won't cost the agency any-

thing if they do go to court.

Fortunately lawmakers are trying to remedy the loophole the court created with this decision (see Swearingen's grade), and we hope they are successful.

The bottom line is, the state Supreme Court, and most of the courts below it, are engaged in a multi-year judicial rewrite of the state's open records laws. It's judicial activism of the worst kind, and it represents a steady erosion of transparency at all levels of government.

Judge Michael Bloom

As mentioned above, in a disastrous ruling for open government last year, Oneida County circuit judge Michael Bloom got his way, both with the state court of appeals and the state



Bloom

Supreme Court, both of which allowed his judicial activism to rewrite the open meetings law.

Because of Bloom, local governments can pretty much discuss whatever they want and anytime, if they are willing to have it tested in court. Judge Bloom did not make an open government ruling this past year that we know of, but this one was good enough to establish him a black mark for a century.

The Wisconsin Legislature

We have said for many years that the Wisconsin Legislature is a miserable failure when it comes to transparency, and we haven't changed our minds.

One more year gone, and one more year has passed that the Legislature has not subjected itself to the open records retention law, meaning they can destroy records any time they want.

Grades

From page 16

Oneida County supervisor Bob Thome

As the story in today's edition describes, supervisor Bob Thome slipped documents into the meeting packets emailed to land conservation committee members, in particular a ballot with recommendations on how to vote on proposed shoreland zoning amendments at an upcoming March 29 public hearing.



Thome

Many of the recommendations oppose what the zoning committee approved to send to public hearing. Nobody knows for sure who else might be behind the ballot beside Thome, if anyone. No one knows who the ballot would be distributed to, or how, or what Thome wanted the committee to do, if anything.

But what everyone does know is that Thome wanted a discussion without putting the specific item on the agenda. It appears Mr. Thome was trying to stack the deck with some narrowly distributed ballot without those who support the ordinance amendments ever finding out.

This is just the latest in a pattern of disregard of the open government laws of the state. Several years ago, Mr. Thome was knee-deep in a lake association scheme to rewrite a portion of the shoreland ordinance — in collaboration with the DNR — without ever telling the committee of jurisdiction.

The plan was of course to present a rewritten ordinance as a fiat accomplice, get a quick public hearing, and ram the ordinance changes through.

It could never have worked, and didn't, but during the process the DNR even refused to meet with the elected committee of jurisdiction, the county zoning committee, preferring to pal around with Thome and his cronies instead.

With Thome involved, there is always secrecy — an unposted ballot slipped in the meeting documents; an ad hoc committee working with the DNR to override elected officials, or worse.

Thome could almost be the worst of the cast. In fact, these days Thome reminds us a lot of now retired Bob Mott, who was the unchallenged Darling of Darkness in Oneida County government. Thome has picked up where Mott left off in the mission to snuff out all light in government, leaving not even a smidgen as he picks up Mott's mantle and smashes his black anvil upon all those who cry for the disinfectant of sunlight.

Behind him, on the horizon, there is Mott himself, a giant cloaked reaper lifting and waving pom-poms larger than life, cheering on with his tufted squad of dark censors the new Darling of Darkness, the one and only Bob Thome.

Secretary of State Doug La Follette

Let's see, it's been more than three years since the Covid-19 hysteria and pandemic locked down America, but everything has opened up now, even schools. Well, not everything. We notice that the office of the Wisconsin secretary of state, Doug La Follette, is still closed.

This is the note on the official website: "Due to concerns about COVID-19 (aka Coronavirus) the Secretary of State Office has suspended walk-in services to better protect the health and safety of our staff and customers. We currently do not allow physical walk-ins to the office but will be pleased to speak with you through the door."

How condescending and absurd that is. For one thing, La Follette insists that the secretary of state is an office and position worth keeping and not eliminating but apparently they do nothing so important that they

can't keep the door locked to the public for years after everybody else opened up. The idea that the public must talk to staff "through the door" is a visible and tangible affront to transparency. It is literally the perfect example of the closed door of government, and La Follette is the poster child.

Oneida County public health director Linda Conlon

Not too much to say this year about a not-too-much of a public official like Linda Conlon. For three years she has parroted the public health establishment's lies and it's deliberate and anti-transparent attempts to mislead the public, all the while the public opens its eyes to lies about lockdowns, mandates, and vaccine safety and efficacy.



Conlon

We remember Ms. Conlon standing before the Oneida County board of supervisors and assuring everyone that it was "just two weeks to flatten the curve." And she was off and running with the rest of the public health cartel. Funny how three years later she and all the rest of them have their jobs, and continue to promote the jabs, while excess deaths soar and the nightly news is littered with the headlines of young men and women who have "died suddenly."

She is no better than the rest of them and not to be trusted or believed.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

How low can an agency go?

Well, whenever that question is asked, to find the right answer you only have to head to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). They are the lowest of the low, and the most secretive of the secret.

This year, the modus operandi — lie and distort — is the same.

For example, the department has proposed to combine five chapters of the administrative code for efficiency sake and consolidations, but what it really is is a camouflaged attempt to assert authority where they have no authority to do so, and without any accountability or oversight.

What the DNR is really doing is changing the rules governing structures in navigable waters.

Of course the DNR lies and says it is just a little housekeeping: "This rulemaking is necessary to align the administrative code with statutory and programmatic changes and to consolidate these rules to improve administrative efficiency."

But as Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce points out, while the DNR says it intends to impose "reasonable" restrictions on the construction of piers, wharves, and culverts, such exemptions are clearly prescribed by statute.

The agency says another objective is the "consideration and potential incorporation of activity specific performance-based standards for permitting decisions" but WMC points out that the agency fails to cite any explicit statutory authority for such sweeping new requirements. Under the law, WMC argues, no agency may implement or enforce any standard, requirement, or threshold unless it is "explicitly required or explicitly permitted" by statute.

But, in its underhanded way, that's just what the DNR is trying to do.

And then there is the agency's behavior in its bid to purchase the Pelican River Forest easement. As Oneida County board chairman Scott Holewinski has pointed out, the DNR had given the county little notice of the purchase and even less time to object. And when Holewinski did try to object, the agency didn't respond.

"There was no notification," Holewinski said. "In about September, the DNR sent me a letter that I

had 30 days to submit an approval or disapproval. They gave me a DNR telephone number to call. I called that number five times and left messages."

Holewinski said he never got a return call until after he submitted a resolution objecting to it.

"Then everybody came out of the woodwork," he said. "The DNR didn't do anything. They kind of hid on this thing. All we wanted was simple questions answered and we couldn't get an answer."

Holewinski said the DNR and involved groups failed to give adequate notification and information but suddenly now it was they who wanted more time.

"The DNR didn't do its job," he said. "You want to communicate now because we objected to it, but you didn't want to communicate with us up front."

Holewinski also both pointed out that the DNR publicized to the media and to the NRB resolutions passed by towns such as Schoepke supporting the easement, while never mentioning towns that passed resolutions opposing it, such as Monico and Sugar Camp.

It's always the same old story with the DBR. They fail miserably.

President Joe Biden

Mr. Biden is already one of the least transparent presidents ever, worse than even Barack Obama, and that takes a lot of work.

Let us count the ways.

As other reporters have complained, the administration has taken no steps to address significant problems relating to agencies' compliance with the Freedom of Information Act.

In February 2021, more than 40 organizations co-signed a letter, urging Biden to improve FOIA administration and offering a multitude of suggestion about how that might be accomplished. The president has done none of it.

Others, like the Knight Institute, point out that the administration has also failed to end the unnecessary secrecy surrounding the final legal opinions of the Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) that bind federal agencies and officials on issues of public concern.

Those legal opinions have the force and effect of law, and so they should be published so the public can see them.

And here's a really big one: the Biden administration recently argued before the Supreme Court that the public has no constitutional right to see secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court opinions authorizing the surveillance of Americans.

Talk about weaponizing the federal government. The refusal to release legal opinions underpinning the government's very actions speaks to a government that has turned against its citizens, and stays in power through secrecy.

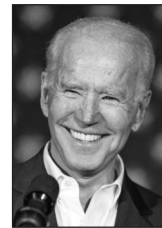
Of course, there's the whole classified document thing, apparently classified documents stream across the landscape like so many strands of spaghetti spilled across the dining table. The president has stonewalled the media on basic questions surrounding the fiasco.

PLATINUM F — THE WORST OF THE WORST

Gov. Tony Evers

The governor of Wisconsin has such a bad record on open government issues that almost anybody looks good by comparison.

Over the course of his first term, Evers



Biden



Evers

found many ways to get sued over open records and to demonstrate a downright hatred of open government, and, by the looks of it, his second term will be no better.

Our favorite from his first term is when he tried to change the open records law to state that, instead of requests having to have a subject matter OR a time frame, which is what the statute actually says, the law really meant that a request has to have a subject matter AND a time frame.

He actually went into court and argued that "or" meant "and."

He lost, but he wasn't dejected. Evers decided against appeal, and turned over the records, but, he said, only because he wanted to, not because he had to.

What a guy.

This past year, Evers has already been chastised for a lack of transparency in spending all that Covid money the state has received, and which the governor has complete control over spending.

In December, the Legislative Audit Bureau said that Evers's Department of Administration did not provide information it claimed the governor based his decisions on when handing out some \$3.7 billion in pandemic aid over the past two years.

According to the LAB, the administration received \$5.7 billion between March 2020 and June 2022 in federal coronavirus relief from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, the American Rescue Plan Act and the Consolidated Appropriations Act. Then, too, this past year, the governor vetoed the Classroom Transparency Act, a bill that would require students to share their curriculum, lesson plans, and assignments with parents so they know just what their children are being taught.

The governor said it would cost too much to implement a plan that gave parents critical information about what their children are being taught, despite the state's \$7 billion surplus.

How less transparent can you be? State Sen. Duey Stroebel put it best when he said:

"A parent should not need to file an open records request, and possibly pay a fee, to find out what is being taught in the classroom."

Incomplete

Vilas County district attorney Karl Hayes

Vilas County district attorney Karl Hayes is still relatively new on the scene as the Vilas County district attorney, and we have not had enough open government matters run his way to give him an adequate grade.

We will say that the question for Mr. Hayes in Vilas County is: Will he follow in the footsteps of former Vilas district attorney Martha Milanowski when he finally faces with an open records or open meetings controversy?

Ms. Milanowski was a staunch supporter of the open government laws of this state and constantly acted in ways that upheld those laws, no matter which position she was in at the time.

Time will tell, but we hope Mr. Hayes chooses the path blazed by Ms. Milanowski — the path of sunshine and not one of darkness.

Plum Lake town board

Since the resignation of town clerk/treasurer Sharon Brooker last year, the town of Plum Lake has managed to function with the appointment of Bob Klager to handle the day to day operations with former Eagle River city clerk Deb Brown assisting in an advisory role.

Since Brooker's resignation, town electors in November voted to split the clerk/treasurer position into two separate, elected positions.

Next year, we'll see how things are going.