

TALK AROUND TOWN

Zupke withholds critical public information

“Caller reports several garages on an unspecified street in an unspecified town broken into and property stolen.”
 “Caller reports a man in a car has been parked and taking photos of kids at an unspecified playground at an unspecified school.”

“Caller from an unspecified town reports a town official is embezzling money in unspecified ways.”

How useful is any of the above information to you? Doesn't it seem like the unspecified information is pretty important — that it could be useful to residents who want to protect themselves and others?

Well, that's too bad if you live in Ashland County.

Sheriff Brian Zupke recently unilaterally decided to remove all location information from the police logs that we have for decades been running in the paper.

Zupke told us that he removed “personal identifying information” from the weekly logs — and even if that were true, it would be illegal. Personal identifying information on a public record is still a public record.

But what he said is patently *not* true. He removed all location information whatsoever; see the attached image of two entries in the most recent log. They could hardly be more innocuous — water over a road and a car-deer crash. The large white blocks at the top of each entry are where location information should be contained.

It's hard to imagine whose personal

identifying information needs protection here — the deer's? The road's?

To be clear: We've never identified a crime victim in these reports — their names always were blacked out — and we've never used specific addresses from the logs. We've only given readers enough information to determine the general area in which things were reported: “Caller reports a tavern on Highway 13 in Bayfield broken into and cash stolen,” for example.

Now, there's a very practical reason for including location information. As I referenced above, if you live in the area where garages are being broken into, or if your kid plays on the playground where a creeper is hanging around, you very definitely should have that information.

More to the point, those police reports are public records. There is absolutely nothing in the law that allows this sheriff or any sheriff to decide, across the board, that the public has no right to that information. At the very least, the law requires public officials to conduct a balancing test, weighing the value of disclosing information against the harm that could be done by releasing it.

Zupke is performing no such tests.

We can and will seek legal remedies to this situation. Unfortunately, those remedies could very well involve suing the county for release of public records, which ultimately would cost the county — and taxpayers



PETER J. WASSON

Log Number	Incd #	Date Received	AGY	Dspr	Source	Incident Type
CD-23-08360		4/9/2023	Sunday	A1	maronso	OFFCR WEATHE WEATHER RELATED CALL
<p>Times Received 1904 Dispatched 1908 Primary Officer Status Disposition Approved Arrived 0000 Cleared 1912 654 NEW 1</p> <p>Comments: Title: Police Dispatch</p> <p>Input: maronso 04/09/2023 19:08:07 Edited: maronso 04/09/2023 19:11:38 654 MADE CONTACT WITH HWY DEPT TO REPORT WATER ON ROADWAY NEAR LISTED LOCATION // HWY DEPT WILL BE PUTTING CONES OUT, WATER IS HALFWAY INTO THE EASTBOUND LANE AND WILL ONLY BE GETTING WORSE</p> <p>Input: maronso 04/09/2023 19:11:47 Edited: maronso 04/09/2023 19:11:47 ADDED TO MAP</p>						
CD-23-08357		4/9/2023	Sunday	A1	apillat	911 ANIMAL ANIMAL COMPLAINTS
<p>Times Received 1821 Dispatched 1824 Primary Officer Status Disposition Approved Arrived 1837 Cleared 1838 616 NEW 1</p> <p>Comments: Title: Police Dispatch</p> <p>Input: apillat 04/09/2023 18:22:55 Edited: apillat 04/09/2023 18:22:55 911 CALL REPORTS HITTING A DEER / CALLER DOES NOT NEED ASSISTANCE BUT ADVISED THE DEER WILL NEED TO BE DISPATCHED</p> <p>Input: apillat 04/09/2023 18:38:46 Edited: apillat 04/09/2023 18:38:46 NORTH SIDE OF ROAD / DEER DECEASED UPON 616 ARRIVAL</p>						
CD-23-08334		4/9/2023	Sunday	A1	apillat	911CEL MENTAL MENTAL SUBJECT OR E.D.

A sample of recent logs from the Ashland County Sheriff's Department. The blank areas in the upper left normally would include the location of the events listed.

— money.

In the meantime, readers can help.

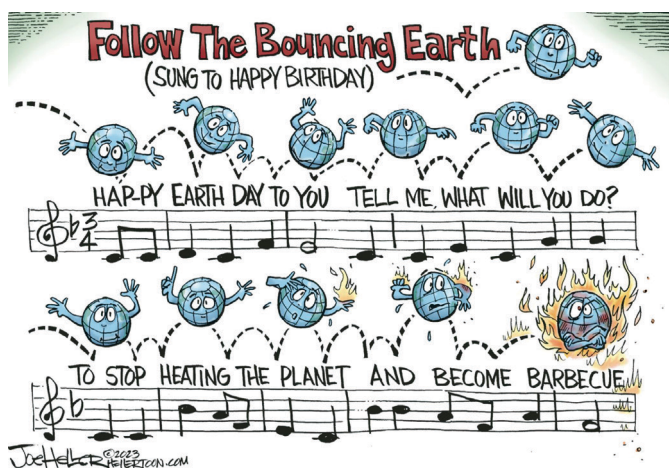
We know these records are important to people; when we don't publish them, readers call me. And I'm not publishing them now because without location information, the logs are essentially useless.

You can call Zupke and tell him that you believe public information should be public — that the information he has decided to withhold doesn't belong to him, it belongs to taxpayers who expect him to follow the law.

His phone number is 715-685-7640.

Press 4 and then enter his last name to get directly to his desk. See if you have any better luck getting answers about why a public official would withhold public information from the public, when doing so could actually endanger the public that he is sworn to protect.

Peter J. Wasson is managing editor of the Ashland Daily Press.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR POLICY

The Ashland Daily Press welcomes letters to the editor from readers and the community. In order to facilitate constructive dialogue in the community, letters must meet certain requirements.

Letters are limited to 300 words, must be signed, and authors must provide their name, address and a contact number. The author's name and city of residence will be published with the letter. Readers may submit a letter once every two weeks.

The Daily Press reserves the right to edit letters for length and clarity and to reject letters that do not meet the newspaper's standards for publication.

To submit a letter to the editor, send it to pressnews@ashlanddailypress.net or Letters to the Editor, Ashland Daily Press, 122 W. Third St., Ashland WI 54806.

What do you think?

Email Letters to the Editor to pwasson@ashlanddailypress.net



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