

TALK AROUND TOWN

Crime reports return

Readers today will find a return of the Ashland County sheriff's report to our pages.

If you'll recall, I wrote a column in April explaining that Ashland County Sheriff Brian Zupke had decided to eliminate all names, location information and other details from the reports — so much that printing them was essentially useless. Bayfield County Sheriff Tony Williams at about the same time did something similar, removing most location information.



PETER J. WASSON

The result: We ended up with reports such as, "Cable resident at an unspecified location reports a shed at his home on an unspecified road broken into and unspecified property stolen."

Given the lack of information, I saw no point in continuing to print the reports.

As I wrote in April, nothing in the law allows a sheriff or any other public official to withhold this information. Police records are public records, and the locations and other data in the reports gave readers valuable information about what was going on in their neighborhoods and — perhaps — when and how they should watch out for themselves or their neighbors.

Since that time, I have received probably 30 or 40 calls and emails from readers asking about the absence of reports, demonstrating that they indeed valued that information. Many did as I asked and phoned Zupke to demand their return.

That alone didn't work, so we began filing formal open-records requests and hired a lawyer, who explained public records law to the county:

"According to your response to the Ashland Daily Press requests, you redacted '(a) names, phone numbers and street addresses of individuals involved in criminal calls and (b) names and addresses of individuals involved in non-criminal calls.' Notably, the second class of redactions does not concern crime victims or witnesses. Given the only reason you gave to support redaction under the balancing test concerned the protection of crime victims and witnesses, all redactions concerning non-criminal calls should

be eliminated and the underlying information disclosed immediately.

"Next, not every individual 'involved in criminal calls' meets the definition of 'victim' or 'witness' under Wis. Stat. § 950.02. To the extent any of the redacted information concerns individuals not meeting the statutory definitions of 'victim' or 'witness,' that information should be disclosed.

"Moreover, the Wisconsin Attorney General has opined that chapter 950 does not 'prohibit law enforcement agencies or other public entities from disclosing personal identifiers of crime victims and witnesses in response to public records

requests.' Even after the passage of the Marsy's Law constitutional amendment, the Attorney General's office stated record custodians generally cannot redact all information pertaining to crime victims."

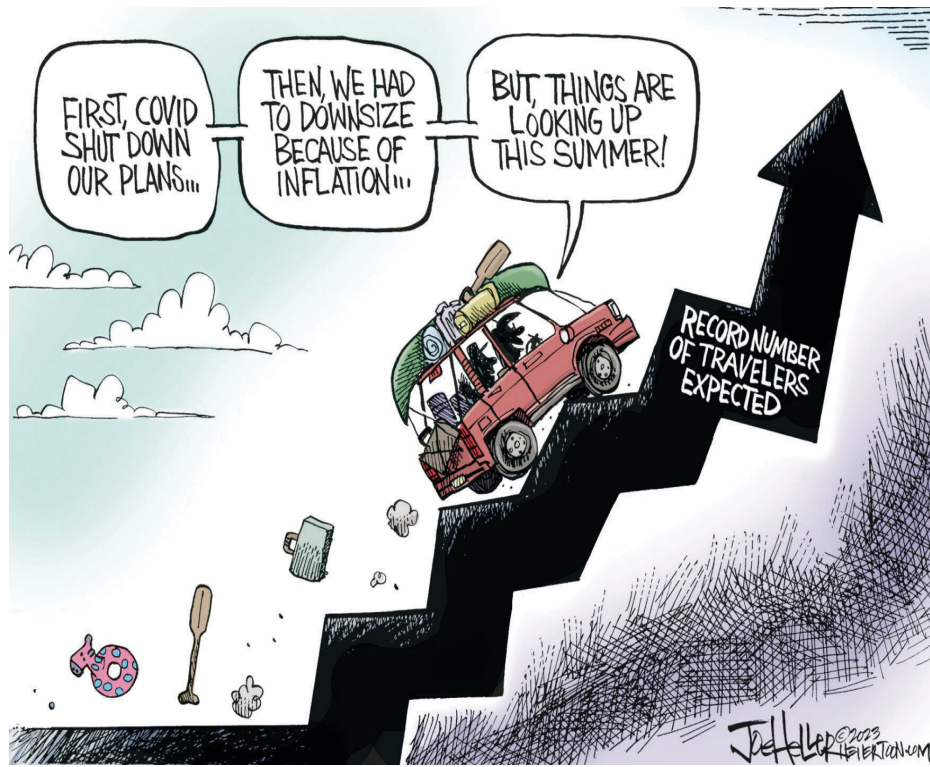
One important note: The Daily Press never published names or specific addresses from the reports we received for decades from the sheriff's department. We gave enough information for readers to make informed decisions, but not to identify anyone.

The letter from our attorney, who represents many Wisconsin news outlets in their quests for public records, appears to have worked. We didn't have to sue to get access to the records, which is good for everyone involved. Taxpayers won't have to foot the bill for a lawsuit in which they — the public — would have ended up paying for access to public records.

We now have forwarded that letter to Sheriff Williams in Bayfield County, in hopes that he, too, will return valuable information to his reports without us having to get the courts involved.

One final note: You will see that the report today is quite out of date, covering the first week of May. The sheriff has explained that he is short staffed — a situation with which I'm certainly familiar — and is training a new person who will send future reports. I hope to get them updated as soon as we can.

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



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Urge state to fund the arts

EDITOR: The Wisconsin Legislature budgeted a meager \$807,100 for the arts in 2023. That equates to just 14 cents of arts funding per resident — the lowest in the country.

Compare that to Minnesota, which has increased their arts budget to more than \$43 million. That's \$7.34 of arts funding per person.

Why should we care about investing in arts and culture? In Wisconsin alone, the creative sector is a \$10.8 billion industry with more than 87,000 jobs. The arts improve quality of life and local

economies by making our downtowns more vibrant and attractive to residents, visitors, and entrepreneurs. There is also considerable evidence that kids who participate in the arts do better in school with improvements in reading, mathematics, critical thinking and social skills. Perhaps most importantly, arts and culture bring us together to share stories and create meaning, which is vital for healing fractured and polarized communities. Our region is incredibly fortunate to have such a robust creative community working tirelessly (often as volunteers) to produce fine art shows, plays, festivals, concerts — the list goes on.

But they need our support.

Right now, there are a couple of initiatives under consideration by the state Legislature. There is a proposal to increase Wisconsin Arts Board funding by just \$552,500 so that we can receive a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. State Sen. Romaine Quinn has also made a budgetary motion to establish a Rural Creative Economy Grant program. The budget will be voted on next month so time is of the essence. Contact your representatives and urge them to support arts and culture.

Nicole Foster, Ashland

What do you think?

Email Letters to the Editor to pwasson@ashlanddailypress.net



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