

TALK AROUND TOWN

County administrator keeps residents in the dark

Ashland County Administrator Dan Grady doesn't want you to know whether he is doing his job well.

The County Board in April conducted a performance evaluation of Grady, presumably rating him on whether he is effective, fair and competent and met or failed to meet any goals that board members spelled out for him.

Immediately afterward, the Daily Press asked Grady for copies of the evaluation.

Grady declined, offering the preposterous argument that because the document was discussed in a closed session of the County Board, it was no longer a public record. Follow that argument to its logical conclusion, and elected officials could discuss any document in closed session — an accounting of how the county is spending money; a complaint filed by neighbors about the local

dogcatcher; the results of a survey of residents' opinions on county parks — and it could be withheld.

So the Daily Press filed a formal, written request for the evaluation.

This time, Grady issued the following, written response:

"The county is in the middle of contract extension negotiations with the county administrator. Releasing this information now may harm or hinder the county's ability to negotiate in the best interests of the county. Therefore, I am denying your request."

A couple of points to make here: First, everyone involved — the county administrator and County Board members — already has seen the performance review. The board members wrote and approved it, and Grady had it handed to him. So the only way disclosing the document could harm the negotiations is if you

pesky taxpayers read it and got involved, letting your elected leaders know your opinions on the pending contract.

That's precisely the kind of interaction Wisconsin open-records law is intended to foster. It's why, in our state, all government documents are presumed to be open.

"In recognition of the fact that a representative government is dependent upon an informed electorate, it is declared to be the public policy of this state that all persons are entitled to the greatest possible information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts of those officers and employees who represent them," the law says. "Further, providing persons with such information is declared to be an essential function of a representative government and an integral part of the routine duties of officers and employees whose responsibility it is to provide such information."

So denying our request wasn't

just illegal. It violated the entire spirit of the state statute.

Second, Grady didn't follow the law, which requires him to cite specific exceptions that allow him to withhold records after performing a balancing test that considers the value of the public's right to know versus the possible harm caused by releasing them.

He didn't do that. So on May 23, the Daily Press wrote to Grady explaining that his denial didn't follow the law and renewed our request for the document.

As of June 2, he hadn't responded in any way to that request.

We have no idea what his evaluation says about the job Grady is doing. We don't know if he has failed to meet standards. Maybe he's doing such a bang-up job that he deserves a raise.

We — and you — have no way of knowing as of now.

What we do know is that his contract renewal comes before the

County Board on the day this is reaching readers — Tuesday, June 6.

That means Grady, by violating open-records law and withholding what is without question a public record for well over a month, got what he wanted.

You pesky taxpayers won't have a say in whether his contract is renewed, if he gets a raise or other perks.

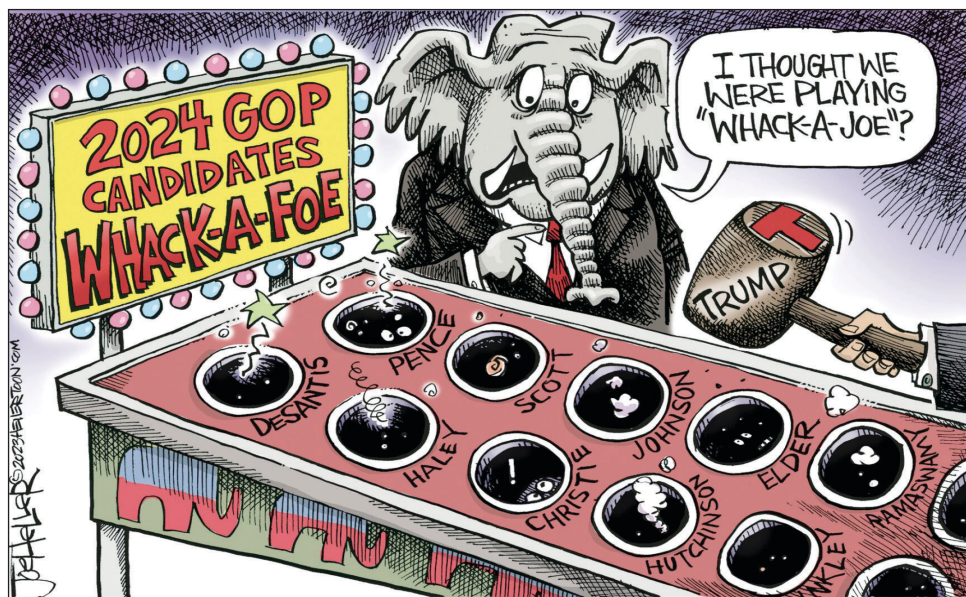
We're not giving up. We will get the evaluation and we will publish it because readers deserve to know how the top official in the county is doing.

But Grady should face consequences for intentionally keeping his constituents in the dark — if not from County Board members, then from the people who pay his salary.

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



PETER J. WASSON



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

End winner-takes-all voting

EDITOR: Wisconsin should join with the other numerous states that have passed the national popular vote interstate compact. The president should be elected like other offices and be the person who gets the most votes throughout the entire country. Everybody's vote should matter. The shortcomings of the current system of electing the president stem

from state "winner-takes-all" laws that award all of a state's electoral votes to the candidate receiving the most popular votes in each state. Because of these state winner-takes-all laws, presidential candidates ignore voters in states where they are safely ahead or hopelessly behind. The general-election campaign for president ends up in only a dozen or fewer states. State winner-takes-all laws have enabled five of

our 45 presidents to come into office without winning the most popular votes nationwide. This is not right. Our country would be much better off if the winners of the popular vote had actually been able to become president. We have to change our current system before another president who has not won the popular vote gets sworn in.

Laura Lokken,
Ashland

What do you think?

Email Letters to the Editor to pwasson@ashlanddailypress.net



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