



FROM THE *Editor's Desk*

BY SARAH NIGBOR

Public comment truth

I'm a bit riled up.

The Ellsworth School Board meeting on Monday, Feb. 13 was packed. Extra seats had to be set out to accommodate the crowd, and some were still left standing at the door to the Ellsworth Elementary School community room. I'll admit, I was curious. It's rare that anyone attends school board meetings, unless they are on the agenda for a recognition or presentation. What could all these people be here to say?

Ellsworth School Board allows anyone who wants to speak during public comment. They request a three-minute time limit and that people sign in on a sheet of paper at the front of the room. This is to place speakers' names in the minutes as a matter of public record. It could also help the board or superintendent reach out to that person later to further discuss their comment or answer a question.

Superintendent Barry Cain told the group assembled to sign in on the sheet if anyone wanted to speak. Twice. When public comment time came, the board noted that no one had signed up to speak. I was surprised. I saw nothing controversial on the agenda. So they must have had another reason to attend, but why was no one speaking up?

The meeting ended with a closed session about a personnel item, at which time the public was asked to leave (which is how closed sessions work). People left the room grumbling, but again, no one spoke. I thought maybe I'd catch one of them outside and ask why so many people were there, but they scattered to their vehicles faster than I could blink.

Imagine my surprise later when I looked on the Ellsworth WI Community Happenings Facebook page, which was filled with comments on how parents were "not allowed" to speak at the school board meeting. I'm sorry, but I'll be blunt. That's a crock of crap. It infuriates me when people spread lies and wrong information on social media, which gets people all into a tizzy. The board never denied anyone the chance to speak. It's clear that people didn't know how a school board meeting works. I understand not everyone does. But if you don't, ask!

My question is, why didn't anyone ask? There were at least 20 people there who looked like they had something to say. Not one single person asked for clarification on how to be heard. Instead, they took to social media and spread misinformation.

I found out through the posts on Facebook that parents have questions about K9 locker searches, vaping in the bathrooms, etc. These are all valid questions. People should reach out to school administration or school board members instead of stirring up a frenzy on Facebook with inaccurate information.

For those who are wondering, here is what the Wisconsin Department of Justice has to say about speaking at public school board, city council, county board or town board meetings:

"The Wisconsin Open Meetings Law acknowledges the public is entitled to the fullest and most complete information regarding government affairs as long as it does not hinder the conduct of governmental business. All meetings of governmental bodies, such as a city council, shall be held publicly and be open to all citizens at all times unless otherwise expressly provided by law. The open meetings law **does not** require a governmental body to allow members of the public to speak or actively participate in an open session meeting. The law only grants citizens the right to attend and observe open meetings.

"However, the law permits a governmental body to set aside a portion of an open meeting as a public comment period. While public comment periods are not required, if a governmental body decides to have such a comment period, it must be included in the meeting notice.

"There are other state statutes—other than the open meetings law—that require governmental bodies to hold public hearings regarding certain matters. Unless such a statute specifically applies, a governmental body has wide discretion over any public comment period it chooses to permit. Besides the discretion over whether to allow public comments at all, a body also has discretion to decide to what extent it will allow public participation. For example, a governmental body can limit how much time each citizen may speak.

"If a governmental body permits a public comment period, it may receive information from the public, and it may discuss any subject raised by a member of the public. A body may not take any formal action on such a subject unless it was identified in the body's meeting notice. If a citizen raises a subject that is not included on the meeting notice, it may be advisable for the body to limit substantive discussion on the subject until a subsequent meeting in which the body can include the subject on the meeting notice."

LETTERS to the Editor

Honoring Washington for Presidents' Day

To the editor,

George Washington condemned partisanship in 1796. He warned "The alternate domination of one faction over another" would have venomous consequences. Today, it seems we all agree the system is broken, but cling to partisanship as a solution, rather than a source of toxicity. Even if we replace all current legislators, the system will remain broken.

Instead of replacing people, we need to reduce partisanship. Final Five Voting (FFV) does this. The partisan primary is a major source of divisiveness. FFV eliminates partisan primaries and their corresponding "safe seats."

Around 20% of all Wisconsinites vote in August primaries, meaning primary candidates often only appeal to a small subset. When primary winners advance to the gen-

eral election, they often compete in safe districts. They have no incentive to reach out to voters across the aisle.

FFV primaries are nonpartisan primaries, forcing candidates to address everyone. In FFV, the top five candidates from the primary advance to the general, regardless of party. Voters have five choices - not just two - which they rank in order of preference. The candidates who once won primaries on negativity and coasted to general election victories must be civil if they want to be someone's second choice.

Washington didn't just warn us about partisanship, he tasked us with preventing it. Visit gro-wwaction.org to learn more or to sign up to attend a Final Five Voting-themed house party.

Maureen Ash
Town of River Falls



REP. WARREN PETRYK'S *Column*

REPRESENTING WI STATE
ASSEMBLY DISTRICT 93

Celebrating Career & Technical Education Month

The legislative budget process is about to begin, and one of the issues I'm excited to discuss with colleagues from the Chippewa Valley is how to move the needle on addressing our workforce crisis. This is a critical issue in our state that must be addressed because it affects nearly every aspect of our lives. One way we can accomplish this is to ensure that students graduating from our schools and adults looking to reskill have access to the training they require. That is why February is designated as "Career and Technical Education Month" each year.

This month is dedicated to raising awareness of the fantastic technical education system that residents of our state have access to. There are numerous benefits to pursuing an educational career at a technical college, such as earning an industry-recognized credential while also working and earning wages in the same field. The Chippewa Valley Technical College system professionally serves the 93rd Assembly District. It has five campus locations in our area, serves over 7,500 stu-

dents per year, and offers students 120 different programs, 37 certificates, and 15 registered apprenticeship options.

The benefits of obtaining a technical education are self-evident. According to the most recent 2021 graduate outcomes report for Wisconsin, 93% of graduates were employed within six months of graduation, and 92% plan to relocate or work in our state. Furthermore, the median salary for all graduates six months after graduation was \$46,739, with many fields averaging more than \$50,000.

With students participating in our state's technical education system earlier, I hope that we can assist them in achieving the career that they desire while also remaining, working, and raising a family in our great state of Wisconsin. I am excited to continue promoting the success of our technical college system in Wisconsin. If you want to learn more about the local offerings, you can go to Chippewa Valley Technical College's website at www.cvtc.edu



WOODWORKING *Again*

BY DAVE WOOD

The power of the press

Over the years since we moved to River Falls a quarter century ago, I thought I had pretty much given up on the power of the press as the nay sayers predict its imminent decline. And I had reason. When I wrote a column for the old version of the River Falls Journal, I constantly harped to the several mayors who have served since then about the condition of the sidewalks in front of my house on Walnut Street and asked more than 10 times if the city couldn't do something about it. All I ever got for my efforts was a free sympathy beer from my pal Bill Smith and letters from other citizens disappointed with both my and their sidewalks.

And so it remains. Our sunken sidewalk slabs now collect water when the snow melts and which turn to ice for me to slide across on my ancient walker to the point where my Beautiful Wife holds onto my coattails in case I should slip and fall. Alas, the power of the press had failed me—until recently.

Turns out that some newspapers still have valuable sources of power. Recently, I complained on these pages about our hapless paper deliverer, who has ruined my mornings for more than a year for failing to deliver my subscription of the Minneapolis Star Tribune until close to noon. My almost continuous complaints to circulation have resulted in NADA, nothing. So...when my complaint was published in the Pierce County Journal, I thought I'd try another ploy to get my paper delivered at a civilized morning hour, like 8 a.m. and not have to wait around for hours until I could get my crossword puzzle worked and get down to other business. So I clipped out my Pierce County Journal column and mailed it to Mr. Glen Taylor, who not only owns the Timberwolves, but also the Star Tribune and has kept the latter afloat while competitors have filed for bankruptcy or disappeared completely.

Two days after I mailed the column to Mr. Taylor, one of the richest men in Minnesota, our Star Tribune arrived at 7:30 a.m.! And it wasn't even thrown in the gutter, as it often has been. WOW! The power of the press has returned. The day after I received a phone call from Steve Yeager, senior vice president of circulation at the Pulitzer Prize winning newspaper, asking if service had improved and thanking me for staying loyal to the paper after the lousy service that hapless deliverer had delivered.

And it's not only the insignificant problems like late delivery that has delivered under the aegis of press power. Two years ago, I read in the Star Tribune a sad story by reporter John Reinan about the fate of the Chatfield, Minn. News, billed as the oldest weekly newspaper in Minnesota. Seems that longtime receptionist Pamela Bluhm went to work one Monday morning to discover that the door to the newspaper where she had worked for many years was padlocked and the owner had left without telling Pamela.

Undaunted, Pamela cashed in her savings and purchased the newspaper from the own-

er—such sales are common these days—and Reinan reported that Bluhm had reopened, that the coffee pot was on and she was going to give publication a try. But she told the Strib that she had no money to hire reporters and was depending on Chatfield customers to drop in and report to her the news. She also told Reinan that local subscribers had volunteered to take her galleys to a town across the border in Iowa where the Chatfield news was printed and return with the published newspapers. Reinan's story made the wire services and Pamela began receiving orders from former Chatfield residents for subscriptions and donations of cash to tide her over until ads started coming in.

I've been writing columns for rural and urban newspapers for years and have back files about life in rural America for years, so I called Pamela Bluhm who recognized my name from my appearance for years in the Star Tribune. I told her I'd send her some refreshed old columns and write new ones aimed at Chatfield—on the house!

She accepted. Soon other readers were writing columns for Pamela, including a retired local preacher named Vrieze who wrote charming vignettes about his life growing up on a farm near Chatfield. A former resident appears regularly to recall his days as an actor/director of Chatfield's arts community and how he once directed "The Music Man" at the Chatfield theatre and was surprised when its famous author Meredith Willson and his wife came to see the performance.

New subscriptions continue to fly in, local political and business news began getting covered and today I receive a very substantial issue every week, full of real estate ads and other local businesses who missed a chance to communicate with its patrons when the newspaper was shut down.

Through Reinan's press publicity, Pam has been able to shuck her old receptionist's job and now writes a column, reporting the names of new subscribers, a new Bundt cake recipe she has just tried, what she cooked for the town's annual free Thanksgiving dinner and how "John Jones," a neighbor recently dropped by to fix the newspaper's screen door fronting Main Street. She also spends time travelling to seminars sponsored by the Minnesota Newspaper Association to pick up tips on good newspapering, all the while providing services to the larger Chatfield community, including free obituaries!

And the fingers of the Press reach far and wide: I just received a phone call from a former Chatfield resident who now lives in Illinois to say that he enjoyed my column about making Gammelost, the stinky Norwegian cheese. Who am I to say the Press has lost its power?

Dave would like to hear from you. Phone him at 715-426-9554 unless you're from the SPCA.



SENATOR JEFF SMITH'S *Column*

REPRESENTING WISCONSIN'S
31ST DISTRICT

Local government is democracy in action

"Where do you live?"

There are a lot of ways to answer that question. I live in the United States, in the state of Wisconsin, in Eau Claire County, and in the town of Brunswick. Each of these jurisdictions is a "unit of government" and each has its own powers and responsibilities.

The term "local units of government" can mean cities, villages, towns or counties. Each of these local subdivisions has its own role and its own kind of authority. Each has limits to its powers, as determined by statute, and there are differences in the way each is governed and operated.

Seventy percent of Wisconsin's population live in a city or village. Cities and villages are both created by the state, which delegates authority to local units of government. Our constitution describes these units of government as "home rule," which means they have the ability to govern themselves as they see fit, so long as they abide by the state and federal law.

Home rule is meant to ensure that cities and villages are able to be responsive to local concerns. Villages and cities have their own legislative branches, known as city councils or village boards. Members of the council or board can determine policy locally, as long as it does not conflict with the state or federal constitutions.

Many cities, like La Crosse, elect a mayor who works with the council. Others, like Eau Claire, operate with a hired city administrator who answers to the elected city council. In cities, city council members can be elected at-large (representing the entire city) or by districts.

Most Wisconsin villages elect a board president and board members. The Board of Trustees or village board, which acts as the legislative branch, is generally elected at-large.

In contrast, Wisconsin towns are not home rule entities, but their authority is granted by state law. Voters elect a town board, but citizen participation may be exercised at annual meetings and special meetings called for specific purposes.

Voters in a town can exercise direct powers, such as approving a tax levy to fund an improvement for the community or reorganizing

local government. State law also allows town voters to grant authority to the town board to acquire property or exercise zoning authority.

I highly recommend you attend one of these meetings. They offer great examples of direct democracy in action. This kind of direct participation in democracy is a rare experience, otherwise only experienced by those who have been duly elected and sworn in.

While cities and villages have constitutional powers of home rule, and towns offer more power to citizens in special meetings, counties are very different. Counties are the administrative arms of our state government. The members of the legislative body of the county are usually called county supervisors.

As in cities, some counties have an elected county executive, while others have a county administrator appointed by the county board of supervisors. While the method of appointment differs, responsibilities are the same across the state. Counties only perform functions that are expressly allowed or mandated by state statute or the constitution.

The state gives counties responsibility for a broad swath of services mandated by the state. These include road maintenance, jail and law enforcement, court administration, public health, human services, libraries, vital records, land conservation, property tax collection and elections.

The problem comes when the state's requirements are not supported by the funding necessary to fulfill those services. In areas like education and criminal justice, there are many examples of the legislature mandating services but not funding them. This impedes the ability of local units of government to provide essential services to our citizens.

As we enter into this year's budget deliberations, it's important to consider all that we expect from our local units of government and provide the resources they need to meet those expectations. As state legislators, as county supervisors, as city alderpersons, as village board members and as town supervisors, we are all elected to make sure the citizens of Wisconsin prosper. Let's make sure we are doing everything we can to make that possible.