Your Right to Know / Bill Lueders

Opees awards highlight good and bad

For the sixteenth consecutive year, the [Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council](http://www.wisfoic.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=55&Itemid=92) is presenting its Openness Awards, or Opees, to recognize outstanding efforts to protect the state’s tradition of open government, as well as some of the threats to it.

The awards, part of the observance of national [Sunshine Week](https://www.spj.org/sunshineweek.asp) (sunshineweek.org), March 13-19, are given in six categories and will be presented at the Wisconsin Watchdog Awards reception and dinner in Madison on April 21. (For details, see [wisconsinwatch.org](http://www.wisconsinwatch.org).

The winners are:

**Citizen Openness Award (“Copee”): Christine Brennan.** In looking into a controversial Fond du Lac park redevelopment, Brennan asked to see the [records of communications](https://amp.fdlreporter.com/amp/6541363002) between public officials and project backers. Her experience [helped raise](http://wisfoic.org/april-record-location-fees-invite-abuses/) public awareness of abusive location fee costs and led to [better methods](https://www.fdlreporter.com/story/news/2021/05/14/fond-du-lac-city-council-moves-forward-social-media-policy/5073351001/) for archiving records in Fond du Lac. And the released records spurred a [backlash](https://www.fdlreporter.com/story/news/2021/07/14/fond-du-lac-council-accepts-lakeside-forward-settlement-park/7951852002/) against the project and the [city council members](https://www.fdlreporter.com/story/news/politics/elections/2021/04/06/fond-du-lac-election-incumbent-dan-degner-voted-out-city-council/7093778002/) who supported it.

**Political Openness Award (“Popee”): Winnebago County District Attorney’s Office.** While state district attorneys have statutory authority to bring open records and open meeting enforcement actions, they seldom do. But Eric Sparr, the deputy district attorney of Winnebago County, and his boss, District Attorney Christian Gossett, cut against the grain when they charged Town of Omro officials on eight counts for open records violations.

**Popee Honorable mention: Tony Evers.** Wisconsin’s governor this year [vetoed](http://wisfoic.org/august-lawmakers-seek-to-keep-their-misconduct-secret/) a bill that unanimously passed both houses of the Legislature to create a new legislative human resources office with built-in secrecy provisions. He also [proposed](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2021/03/15/evers-budget-proposal-would-make-public-records-cheaper-some-cases/6911457002/) in his budget to raise the threshold for when records custodians can tack on location costs from $50 to $100.

**Media Openness Award (“Mopee”): Isiah Holmes, *Wisconsin Examiner*.** ReporterHolmes used the state’s open records law to unearth often shocking information on the city’s police department, which [deemed](https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2021/01/13/wauwatosa-mayor-dennis-mcbride-named-as-target-by-police/) Wauwatosa Mayor Dennis McBride a “target” and [maintained](https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2021/01/19/wauwatosa-pd-created-protester-list-during-crackdown-on-peaceful-demonstrations/) a watchlist of protesters and that included [Holmes himself](https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2021/07/06/i-covered-protests-in-wauwatosa-so-the-police-put-me-on-a-list-shared-with-the-fbi/). Exposing such abuses serves the highest purpose of our open records law.

**Open Records Scoop of the Year (“Scoopee”): The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.*** Reporters including John Diedrich, Raquel Rutledge and Daphne Chen used city inspection reports and other records to produce a series of stories, “[Wires and Fires](https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/21190604/milwaukee-journal-sentinel-wires-and-fires-full-series-pdf.pdf),” that exposed how dangerous electrical wiring has for years been causing fires and claiming victims in Milwaukee rental units. It spurred city officials to seek ways to prevent these fires from occurring.

**Whistleblower of the Year: Douglas Oitzinger**. This alderperson in the city of Marinette stood up to his fellow city council members in favor of transparency when he [filed suit](https://www.ehextra.com/news/marinette-alderman-doug-oitzinger-files-lawsuit-against-city/article_6f20db8c-317b-5798-b40c-31c5f1b16928.html) in December alleging that they had improperly gone into closed session to discuss water supply options. “This is about open government,” he told the local paper. “That’s all it’s about.”

**No Friend of Openness (“Nopee”): Michael Gableman and Robin Vos.** The former state Supreme Court justice and state Assembly Speaker seem not to want the public to know details of a [$676,000](https://www.wkow.com/news/politics/vos-contract-for-election-review-to-cost-676-000/article_081b5946-676a-531d-97c0-37b895eeacb0.html) probe into the 2020 election. A judge [found](https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-wisconsin-lawsuits-elections-madison-bb6df7756185eaecd56e00411e115e1e) that their “denials, delays, and refusals” violate the records law, amid [speculation](https://madison.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/judge-raises-concern-that-robin-vos-office-may-have-destroyed-requested-investigation-records/article_06381b69-07d1-597f-b01b-593d6644850c.html) that some records are being destroyed — along with the state’s tradition of open government.

*Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council (*[*wisfoic.org*](https://wisfoic.org/)*), a group dedicated to open government. Bill Lueders is the group’s president.*