Your Right to Know / Bill Lueders

Opees awards honor and chastise

For the 17th consecutive year, the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council has named its annual Openness in Government Awards, or Opees, in honor of national [Sunshine Week](https://www.spj.org/sunshineweek.asp), March 12-18. Five winners and one loser were selected from among an uncommonly large number of nominations.

And the Opees go to:

**Public Openness Award (“Popee”): Jim O’Keefe.** This longtime city of Madison official was nominated by Judith Davidoff, editor of Isthmus newspaper in Madison, for his “extraordinary” accessibility under four mayors. In an era where, she noted, “it is now rare for public administrators to answer their own phones and talk directly to reporters,” O’Keefe goes the extra mile, even intervening to help a reporter who was having trouble getting a call-back from someone else in city government. In recognizing O’Keefe, we also acknowledge the many other public officials in Wisconsin who regard transparency as a blessing and not a burden.

**Media Openness Award (“Mopee”): The Badger Project.** This nonpartisan, nonprofit and citizen-supported investigative reporting outlet, led by managing editor Peter Cameron, pulled back the veil on police officers who are disciplined and even fired for misconduct only to be hired by other law enforcement agencies. It has [filed](https://thebadgerproject.org/2021/10/13/the-badger-project-files-lawsuit-against-la-crosse-police-department-over-public-records/) [lawsuits](https://thebadgerproject.org/2022/06/21/seeking-more-info-about-internal-sexual-harassment-the-badger-project-sues-wausau-pd/) to pry loose relevant records against two police departments (La Crosse and Wausau) and used a list maintained by the state Department of Justice to shine a light on these cases. The group’s reporting is ongoing.

**Citizen Openness Award (“Copee”): Friends of Frame Park.** Concerned about a proposed baseball stadium that would have transformed a local park, this group of Waukesha residents fought all the way to the Wisconsin Supreme Court to defend the public’s right to access records regarding the details of the plan. Sadly, the court’s conservative majority, in a 4-3 vote, reversed an appellate court ruling and [gutted](http://wisfoic.org/august-court-ruling-kneecaps-records-law/) the fee-shifting provisions in the state’s open records law, for which a legislative fix is [now being sought](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2023/02/14/lawmakers-bill-moves-to-strengthen-wisconsin-public-records-law/69899902007/).

**Open Records Scoop of the Year (“Scoopee”): “Cash Not Care,” The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.** This [powerful](https://www.jsonline.com/in-depth/news/2022/01/26/prenatal-care-businesses-grow-under-cloud-fraud-infant-mortality/6111168001/) [series](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/2022/02/10/saying-everybody-should-outraged-milwaukee-alderman-wants-hearing-prenatal-care-coordination-industr/6698789001/) [of](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/investigations/2022/03/10/wisconsin-lawmakers-call-investigation-into-prenatal-care-industry/9446737002/) [articles](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/investigations/2022/08/17/two-milwaukee-prenatal-care-companies-under-investigation-fraud/10282206002/) examined the high infant mortality among Black people in Wisconsin while exposing malfeasance in a shadowy network of businesses known as prenatal care coordination companies. Reporters Cary Spivak and Mary Spicuzza spent months filing records requests, reviewing documents, conducting interviews and doing shoe-leather reporting. The series led to increased scrutiny of these companies by state officials.

**Whistleblower of the Year (“Whoopee”): Mike Meier.** This member of the Wauwatosa School Board [alleged](https://www.fox6now.com/news/wauwatosa-school-board-discussed-public-records-in-secret) that the board met improperly to discuss how to respond to a records request and that he was punished by the board president for being more open than necessary. Meier was quoted [in](https://www.fox6now.com/news/fox6-investigates-school-administrator-encouraged-academic-program-that-paid-her-husband) [several](https://www.fox6now.com/news/wauwatosa-police-no-charges-school-district) [articles](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2021/11/16/wauwatosa-schools-apologize-after-conflict-interest-concern-raised/8626917002/) about a school administrator who helped steer a contract to consultants who employed her husband. In the end, both the [administrator](https://www.fox6now.com/news/wauwatosa-police-no-charges-school-district) and [board president](https://www.fox6now.com/news/wauwatosa-school-board-president-resignation-threat) resigned. Said Meier: “Our whole system counts on the elected officials being watched in the public square as to how they conduct their business.”

**No Friend of Openness (“Nopee”): The Madison Metropolitan School District.** It’s rare for a public institution that depends on taxpayer support to be as awful as this one when it comes to public records and accountability. The district, through spokesperson Tim LeMonds, has become notorious for outrageous [delays](https://captimes.com/news/education/emails-show-strong-reaction-to-mmsds-extended-winter-break-in-january/article_e276942e-1a8e-52fe-a572-a1a9097bf731.html) and [excuses](https://captimes.com/news/education/mmsd-continues-to-have-delays-in-open-records-request-responses/article_117d201a-e352-59bd-aeeb-b4aef6fcf9df.html), prompting [multiple](https://captimes.com/news/education/mmsd-open-records-scrutiny/article_9b8420c2-fc87-570a-a092-fcaf7b19aa2c.html) [lawsuits](https://madison.com/news/local/education/local_schools/conservative-law-firm-sues-madison-school-district-again-for-public-records/article_7ec415aa-5dc5-57a7-9880-b187250cff14.html) alleging violations of the records law. Tom Kamenick of the Wisconsin Transparency Project has said he has “received more complaints about MMSD than any other government agency.” It is time for the district’s casual contempt for the public’s right to know to come to a screeching halt.

*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 council’s president.*



Bill Lueders, provided photo