Your Right to Know / Jeff Seering

Nursing home sale shows

why transparency matters

On Tuesday, Sept. 17, the Sauk County Board voted to spend $40,500 to buy a sheriff’s department vehicle to replace one totaled in a July incident. The resolution printed on the agenda included details of the incident, the car dealer and a fiscal note explaining that the money would come from insurance accounts.

This display of transparency happened one week to the day after the same county board approved contracts to sell the county-owned nursing home to a private entity. That agenda stated the board would meet in closed session to discuss the sale. It did not name the buyer or include the sale price. While the buyer was disclosed in the 45-minute public discussion following the closed session, the sale price was not. The $5.1 million price was revealed the following day in an attachment to a press release. There was no fiscal note on the agenda.

A note might have explained why the county accepted an offer $3.4 million less than the $8.5 million sought when it first marketed the nursing home, which has 48 residents. Nor did the county explain why the price was so much less than the $19 million value for which the county insures the nursing home. All these numbers are from [records](https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/25172172/records-09052024.pdf) I obtained.

The December 2023 resolution that started the process included as a condition: “The potential buyer shall demonstrate a history of 5-star care ratings in the senior health care industry.” That was the county nursing home’s rating at the time.

Medicare’s star system for rating nursing homes is based on regular inspections and citation history. Five-star is much above average, 4-star is above average, 3-star is average, 2-star is below average and 1-star is much below average. The buyer, Aria, operates three nursing homes in the north Milwaukee suburbs that [currently](https://www.medicare.gov/care-compare/results?searchType=NursingHome&page=1&query=Aria&city=Milwaukee&state=WI&zipcode=53225&radius=10&sort=closest&tealiumEventAction=Result%20Page%20-%20Search&tealiumSearchLocation=search%20bar&tealiumSearchInputType=manual%20search%20term) [have](https://www.medicare.gov/care-compare/details/nursing-home/525490?city=Waukesha&state=WI&zipcode=53186) one- and two-star ratings.

The five-star condition was interpreted by most as meaning that the county would seek a private buyer with a history of high-quality care similar to that provided by the county nursing home, which had a 5-star rating in December 2023. That was the county’s official public position concerning the sale, up until Sept. 10, when the board voted to approve the sale to Aria. In the Sept. 10 motion that passed, all of the conditions in the December resolution were superseded by the sale contract.

Between December and September, the board held two closed-session meetings. The only information that came out of those meetings was that the county had chosen to negotiate with a single interested buyer, whose name was kept secret, though it leaked out in late July. A petition drive collected 1,300 signatures opposing the nursing home sale that were presented to the county.

After numerous citizens expressed dismay about Aria’s care rating in public comment on Sept. 10, the board met in closed session with an Aria representative, which was said to be reassuring. After the board came back into open session, one board supporter of the sale turned to the audience and said, “I really wish you could have all been here for the meeting.”

Yes. The audience — made of citizens and taxpayers and people with loved ones in the home — would also have liked to hear the presentation. That this was not allowed was typical of the entire process, in which the public was given less information about the sale of the home for 48 Sauk County residents than it was about replacing a damaged squad car.

Why is the state’s tradition of open government important? Just ask the citizens of Sauk County, who have been treated as though it isn’t.

*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. Jeff Seering, a retired journalist, is a Sauk County resident.*



Jeff Seering, provided photo