

# WISCONSIN PUBLIC RECORDS LAW

Wisconsin Department of Justice  
Division of Legal Services  
October/November 2014



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## Presumption

The public records law "shall be construed in every instance with a **presumption of complete public access, consistent with the conduct of government business**. The denial of public access generally is contrary to the public interest, and only in an exceptional case may access be denied."

— Wis. Stat. § 19.31

2012 DOJ Outline at 1-2, 17; 2014 Supplement at 1



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## Objectives

- Shed light on workings of government and acts of public officers and employees
- Assist members of the public in becoming an informed electorate
- Serve a basic tenet of our democratic system by providing opportunity for public oversight

2012 DOJ Outline at 1-2, 17; 2014 Supplement at 1



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## “Authority”

- Any of specified entities having custody of a record
- Very similar to “governmental body”
- Includes quasi-governmental corporation
- Public records law obligations apply separately to each authority
- *Wis. Prof'l Police Ass'n v. Wis. Cnty. Ass'n*, No. 2014AP249, 2014 WL 4637474 (Wis. Ct. App. Sept. 18, 2013) (recommended for publication): Unincorporated association is not an authority

2012 DOJ Outline at 5-7; 2014 Supplement at 3



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## “Legal Custodian”

- Vested by an authority with full legal power to render decisions and carry out public records responsibilities
- Elective official, chairperson of a committee of elected officials, or designee
- Other authorities to designate one or more positions
- Defaults are highest ranking officer and chief administrative officer, if any
- Other authority staff may participate or assist
- Helpful to establish an internal public records procedure

2012 DOJ Outline at 7-9; 2014 Supplement at 3



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## “Requester”

- Generally, any person who requests inspection of or to copy a record
- More limited rights for persons committed under mental health laws or incarcerated
- Per Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(am), a requester has greater rights to inspect personally identifiable information about himself or herself in a record containing personally identifiable information

2012 DOJ Outline at 5



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## “Record”

“Any material on which written, drawn, printed, spoken, visual or electromagnetic information or electronically generated or stored data is recorded or preserved, regardless of physical form or characteristics, which has been created or is being kept by an authority.”

— Wis. Stat. § 19.32(2)

2012 DOJ Outline at 2-4; 2014 Supplement at 1-3



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## Not a “Record”

- Drafts, notes, and preliminary documents
- Published material available for sale or at library
- Purely personal property
- Material with limited access rights, such as copyrights or patents

2012 DOJ Outline at 4-5



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## Is It a “Record”?

- Not created by the authority but in the authority's possession
- Personal email, calls, and documents on an authority's accounts
- Business email, calls, and documents on personal accounts
- Social media
- Contractors' records

2012 DOJ Outline at 2-4, 26, 38-39, 45-46; 2014 Supplement at 1-3



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## Personal Email, Calls, and Documents on an Authority's Account

- Email sent and received on an authority's computer system is a record
- Includes purely personal email sent by officers or employees of the authority
- Disclosure generally not required
- *Schill v. Wis. Rapids Sch. Dist.*, 2010 WI 86, 327 Wis. 2d 572, 786 N.W.2d 177

2012 DOJ Outline at 3, 26, 38-39, 46; 2014 Supplement at 4-5



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## Communications to elected lawmakers

- Persons who communicate political views to their elected lawmakers should be prepared to see their views made public, with their names attached
- Depending on the totality of circumstances, it may be appropriate to redact personal financial, health, or other similarly sensitive information as "purely personal"
- Possibility of threats, harassment, or reprisals is a legitimate consideration; weight to be accorded depends on likelihood of actual occurrence, however
- *John K. MacIver Inst. for Public Policy, Inc. v. Erpenbach*, 2014 WI App 49, 354 Wis. 2d 61, 848 N.W.2d 862

2014 Supplement at 4-5



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## Government Business Emails, Calls, and Documents on Private Accounts

- These materials may be "records"
- Content determines whether something is a "record," not the medium, format, or location
- **Recommendation:** Conduct a careful search of all relevant accounts
- Personal materials on the same private accounts are not subject to disclosure

2012 DOJ Outline at 3, 45; 2014 Supplement at 4-5



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## Social Media

- Increased use of social media by authorities (Facebook & Twitter)
- Likely to be a "record" if created or maintained by an authority
- Recommended considerations
  - Be familiar with the site – Are the records archived? Who may post, manage, or control? How long is content available?
  - Will third-party messages or posts be "records"?
  - Does the authority have a social media policy?

2012 DOJ Outline at 3, 45, 48



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## Contractors' Records

- Records produced or collected under a contract with the authority are "records" for public records law purposes
  - Records produced or collected "in accordance with, pursuant to, in compliance with, in carrying out, subject to, or because of" a contract
  - Records produced "in the course of" the contracted-for matter
- *Juneau Cnty. Star-Times v. Juneau Cnty.*, 2013 WI 4, 345 Wis. 2d 122, 824 N.W.2d 457

2012 DOJ Outline at 3-4, 50; 2014 Supplement at 2-3



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## Who Can Request?

- Requester need not state the purpose of the request
- Requester generally need not identify himself or herself
- Motive generally not relevant, but context appropriately considered
- *State ex rel. Ardell v. Milwaukee Bd. of Sch. Dirs.*, 2014 WI App 66, 354 Wis. 2d 471, 849 N.W.2d 894: Safety concerns may be relevant, but it is a fact-intensive issue determined on a case-by-case basis in the balancing test
- Limited rights for incarcerated or committed persons

2012 DOJ Outline at 5, 11-12; 2014 Supplement at 4-6



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## Sufficient Request

- Written request or form not required—but may be a good idea
- Magic words not required
- Reasonably describes the information or record requested
- Reasonably specific as to time and subject matter
- Custodian should not have to guess what records the requester wants

2012 DOJ Outline at 11-13



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## Scope of Request

- A large number of responsive records—by itself—does not make a request too broad
- A request cannot so burden an authority that its normal functioning would be impaired
- A requester may have no way of knowing how many responsive records exist
- A requester may have no interest in many “technically” responsive records
- Keep purpose and objective of public records law in mind

2012 DOJ Outline at 12-13



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## Making a Good Request

- Frame requests carefully to produce records actually of interest
- If requesting a particular document, identify it by date, author and title
- Search terms can be useful in requests for email records
- Direct the request to the custodian or other person identified in the authority’s public records notice
- Indicate when cost is a concern

2012 DOJ Outline at 12



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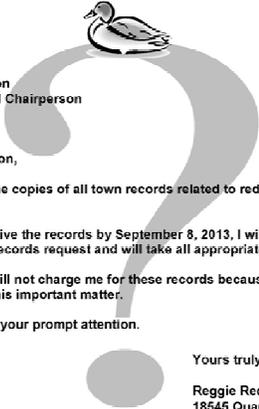
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Chester Chairperson  
 Mythic Town Board Chairperson  
 250 Main Street  
 Mythic, WI 53005

Dear Mr. Chairperson,

Please send me copies of all town records related to redevelopment of the old quarry site.

If I do not receive the records by September 8, 2013, I will assume you are denying my open records request and will take all appropriate legal action.

I expect you will not charge me for these records because of the high public interest in this important matter.

Thank you for your prompt attention.

Yours truly,  
 Reggie Requester  
 18545 Quarry Road  
 Mythic, WI 53000

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18500 Quarry Road  
 Mythic, WI 53000  
 September 3, 2013

Clara Clerk  
 Mythic Town Clerk  
 250 Main Street  
 Mythic, WI 53005

Dear Ms. Clerk:

Pursuant to the Wisconsin Open Records Law, please send me copies of all 2013 Mythic Town Board minutes discussing the Vacation Company's proposed redevelopment of the old Bedrock Quarry site. I only need pages of the minutes on discussing the proposed quarry redevelopment, and don't need copies of any related documents distributed at the Town Board meetings. Also please send me copies of all emails between the Town Board members regarding the quarry redevelopment from May 1 – September 1, 2013. I would prefer to receive the responsive documents by email, if possible.

If the cost of fulfilling my request will be more than \$25.00, please contact me before proceeding. Also please contact me if you have any questions about this request.

Thank you,  
 Rebecca Requester  
 rebeccar@internet.com  
 222 1616

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### Evaluating a Request

- Assess carefully to determine what will be needed to prepare a response
- Don't understand the request? Send the requester a written summary of your understanding or request for clarification
- Inform the requester about a large number of responsive records, or large estimated costs, and suggest/solicit alternatives
- Consider sending the requester an acknowledgment, especially if the response will take some time

2012 DOJ Outline at 12



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Town of Mythic  
250 Main Street  
Mythic, Wisconsin 53000  
[www.mythic.gov](http://www.mythic.gov)

September 6, 2013

Mr. Reggie Requester  
18545 Quarry Road  
Mythic, WI 53005

Dear Mr. Requester:

Mr. Chairman forwarded your open records request for "copies of all town records related to redevelopment of the old quarry site," to me. I am the designated records custodian for all Town of Mythic records.

It is unclear to me what records you are requesting. In addition to the Vacation Company's redevelopment proposal now under consideration by the Town Board, there have been five other quarry redevelopment proposals in the ten years since the Bedrock Quarry closed, as well as numerous consultant reports and general discussions at Town Board meetings. Are you requesting only records related to the current redevelopment proposal, or something else? Also, what is the timeframe of your request and what specific types of materials are you requesting?

An open records request must be reasonably specific as to timeframe and subject matter. Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(b). Please advise me in more detail by September 20 what records you are seeking so that I can fulfill your request.

Please direct all future communications about your open records request to me, at the address above, or at 222-0901 or [clerk@mythic.gov](mailto:clerk@mythic.gov).

Thank you,  
Clara Clerk  
Town Clerk

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## Useful Analysis

1. Does a responsive record exist?
2. Is there an absolute right of access?
3. Is access absolutely denied?
4. Apply the balancing test

2012 DOJ Outline at 17-26



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## Existing Records

- Generally, only records that exist at the time of the request must be produced—to respond, an authority need not create new records
- Continuing requests are not contemplated by the public records law
- Public records law does not require answering questions
- Records retention – Wis. Stat. § 16.61 for state authorities, Wis. Stat. § 19.21 for local authorities

2012 DOJ Outline at 15, 18



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## No Records Exist

- Search for records that might be responsive
- If there are no responsive records, inform the requester
- *Journal Times v. City of Racine Bd. of Police & Fire Comm'rs*, 2014 WI App 67, 354 Wis. 2d 591, 849 N.W.2d 888: It is problematic to deny access to records on substantive grounds, then respond later that there are no responsive records

2012 DOJ Outline at 18



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## Absolute Right of Access

- Not many exist
- Books and papers "required to be kept" by sheriff, clerk of circuit court, and other specified county officials
- Daily arrest logs or police "blotters" at police departments

2012 DOJ Outline at 18-19



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## Absolute Denial of Access

- Can be located in public records statutes
  - Information related to a current investigation of possible employee criminal conduct or misconduct prior to disposition of the investigation
  - Plans or specifications for state buildings
- Can be located in other statutes or case law (might be conditioned on meeting specified criteria)
  - Patient health care records
  - Pupil records

2012 DOJ Outline at 19-26



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## Final Candidates – §19.36(7)

- Each applicant who is seriously considered for appointment or whose name is certified for appointment, and whose name is submitted for final consideration to an authority for appointment, to a state position (except in the classified service) or a local public office.
- Includes all of the following:
  - When there are at least 5 applicants, each of the 5 applicants considered most qualified
  - When there are fewer than 5 applicants, each applicant
  - When an appointment is to be made from a group of more than 5 most qualified applicants, all applicants in the group

2012 DOJ Outline at 21; 2014 Supplement at 5



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## The Balancing Test

- Weigh the public interest in disclosure of the record against the public interest and public policies against disclosure
- Fact intensive
- Must conduct on case by case basis taking into consideration the totality of circumstances
- *State ex rel. Ardell v. Milwaukee Bd. of Sch. Dirs.*, 2014 WI App 66, 354 Wis.2d 471, 849 N.W.2d 894: Identity of the requester and reason for the request generally are not considered in the balancing test, but intent to hurt or harass a record subject may forfeit right to disclosure of certain records
- "Blanket rules" disfavored

2012 DOJ Outline at 26-30; 2014 Supplement at 4, 6-7



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## Some Sources of Public Policies

- Policies expressed in other statutes (such as patient health care records, student records)
- Court decisions
- Crime victim rights expressed in statutes, constitutional provisions, and case law
- Exemptions to open meetings requirements in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) – but only if there is specific demonstration of need to deny access at the time of the request
- Policies expressed in evidentiary privileges
- Public interest in protecting privacy of individuals

2012 DOJ Outline at 26-30; 2014 Supplement at 6-7



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*Town of Mythic  
250 Main Street  
Mythic, Wisconsin 53000  
[www.mythic.gov](http://www.mythic.gov)*

September 6, 2013

Ms. Rebecca Requester  
18500 Quarry Road  
Mythic, WI 53005

Dear Ms. Requester:

Your September 3, 2013, public records request has been received. A response will be provided as soon as practicable and without delay.

In the meantime, please feel free to contact me with any questions you might have. I can be reached at the address above, or at 222-0901 or [clerk@mythic.gov](mailto:clerk@mythic.gov).

Thank you,  
Clara Clerk  
Town Clerk

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## Written Response?

- A written request requires a written response, if the request is denied in whole or in part
- May respond in writing to a verbal request
- A request for clarification, without more, is not a denial
- Must inform requestor that denial is subject to review in an action for mandamus under Wis. Stat. § 19.37(1) or by application to district attorney or Attorney General

2012 DOJ Outline at 14-15



Wisconsin Public Records Law

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## Reasons for Denial

- Reasons for denial must be specific and sufficient
- Purpose is to give adequate notice of reasons for denial and ensure that custodian has exercised judgment
- Reviewing court usually limited to reasons stated in denial
- Availability of same records from other sources generally not a sufficient reason

2012 DOJ Outline at 14-16; 2014 Supplement at 6



Wisconsin Public Records Law

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## Redaction

- If part of a record is disclosable, that part must be disclosed
- Non-disclosable portions must be redacted
- No specific way to make redactions: electronic redaction, black magic marker, cover up with white paper when photocopying
- Redaction constitutes denial of access to the redacted information

2012 DOJ Outline at 16



Wisconsin Public Records Law

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*Town of Mythic*  
250 Main Street  
Mythic, Wisconsin 53000  
[www.mythic.gov](http://www.mythic.gov)

September 18, 2013

Mr. Reggie Requester  
18545 Quarry Road  
Mythic, WI 53005

Dear Mr. Requester:

Enclosed are the records you requested. Confidential information has been redacted.

The cost of this response is \$130. Please send a check in that amount to me at the address above by the end of September.

Thank you,

Clara Clerk  
Town Clerk

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**Clerk, Clara – Town of Mythic**

**From:** Clerk, Clara  
**Sent:** Wednesday, September 18, 2013 2:08 PM  
**To:** rebeccar@internet.com  
**Subject:** Response to 9/3/13 public records request  
**Attachment:** quarry records.pdf

Attached are the records responsive to your 9/3/13 public records request. Home email addresses and home telephone numbers of the Town Board members have been redacted pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 19.36(11). Purely personal information about sports activities of Town Board members' children has been redacted from a few emails pursuant to the Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(a) balancing test. In applying the balancing test, I concluded that any public interest in the disclosure of this purely personal information is outweighed by public policies recognizing the privacy interests of local public officials and their families in matters unrelated to the conduct of government business. See *Schill v. Wisconsin Rapids School District Schill*, 2010 WI 86, ¶ 9 & n. 4 (Abrahamson, C.J., lead op.); *id.*, ¶ 148 & n. 2 (Bradley, J., concurring); *id.*, ¶ 173 & n. 4 (Gableman, J., concurring), 327 Wis. 2d 572, 786 N.W.2d 177.

Locating the responsive records required 3 hours of staff time at \$20.00 per hour, for a total of \$60.00. Wis. Stat. § 19.35(3)(c). Please remit your payment within 30 days to Town Clerk, 250 Main St, Mythic, WI 53000.

Pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 19.35(4)(b) this determination is subject to review by mandamus under Wis. Stat. § 19.37(1) or upon application to a district attorney or the Attorney General.

Please contact me if you have any questions.

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## Timing of Response

- Response is required, “as soon as practicable and without delay”
- **No specific time limits**, depends on circumstances
- DOJ policy: 10 business days generally reasonable for response to simple, narrow requests
- May be prudent to send an acknowledgement
- Penalties for arbitrary and capricious delay

2012 DOJ Outline at 13-14



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## Notice Before Release

- Required by Wis. Stat. § 19.356(2)(a)1
  - Records information resulting from closed investigation into a disciplinary matter or possible employment-related violation of policy, rule, or statute
  - Records obtained by subpoena or search warrant
  - Records prepared by an employer other than the authority about employees of that employer
- Required by Wis. Stat. § 19.356(9)—officer or employee holding state or local public office
  - OAG-07-14 (October 15, 2014)
- Courtesy notice

2012 DOJ Outline at 42-44



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## Costs—General Rules

- Actual, necessary, and direct costs only—unless otherwise specified by law
- Prepayment may be required if total costs exceed \$5.00
- Authority may choose to provide records for free or reduced charge

2012 DOJ Outline at 53-54



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## Permissible Charges

- Copying and reproduction
- Location, if costs exceed \$50.00
- Mailing/shipping
- Others specified in Wis. Stat. § 19.35(3)
- Authorities **may not** charge for redaction costs
- Keep careful records in order to support and calculate requests for payment of costs

2012 DOJ Outline at 53-54



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## Cost of Response

- Clarifying or limiting a request may:
  - Reduce costs to requester
  - Eliminate records not of interest to requester
  - Facilitate a quicker response
- Cost estimates should be reasonable, based on information available before preparing the response or developed during preparation

2012 DOJ Outline at 12, 53-54



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## Remedies and Enforcement

- Mandamus action to challenge:
  - Withholding a record or part of a record
  - Delay in granting access to record or part of record
- Authority may be ordered to release records
- Attorneys fees and costs may be awarded if mandamus action was a cause of the release
- *Journal Times v. City of Racine Bd. of Police & Fire Comm'rs*, 2014 WI App 67, 354 Wis. 2d 591, 849 N.W.2d 888: Voluntary release after filing renders a mandamus action moot, but payment of attorneys fees/costs may be ordered

2012 DOJ Outline at 55-57; 2014 Supplement at 8



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## Further Information

- Consult legal counsel
- Download DOJ Outline and other resources at [www.doj.state.wi.us/dls/open-government](http://www.doj.state.wi.us/dls/open-government)
- Call Connie Anderson, (608) 266-3952
- Write to: Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen  
Department of Justice  
Post Office Box 7857  
Madison, WI 53707-7857



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