

# Open Meetings Law

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT *of* JUSTICE  
ATTORNEY GENERAL *J.B. Van Hollen*



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ATTORNEY GENERAL *J.B. Van Hollen*



# Wisconsin Open Meetings Law

October 31, 2013

Wisconsin Department of Justice

Thomas C. Bellavia

Assistant Attorney General

Wisconsin Department of Justice



**Thank you, "guinea pig" audience!**

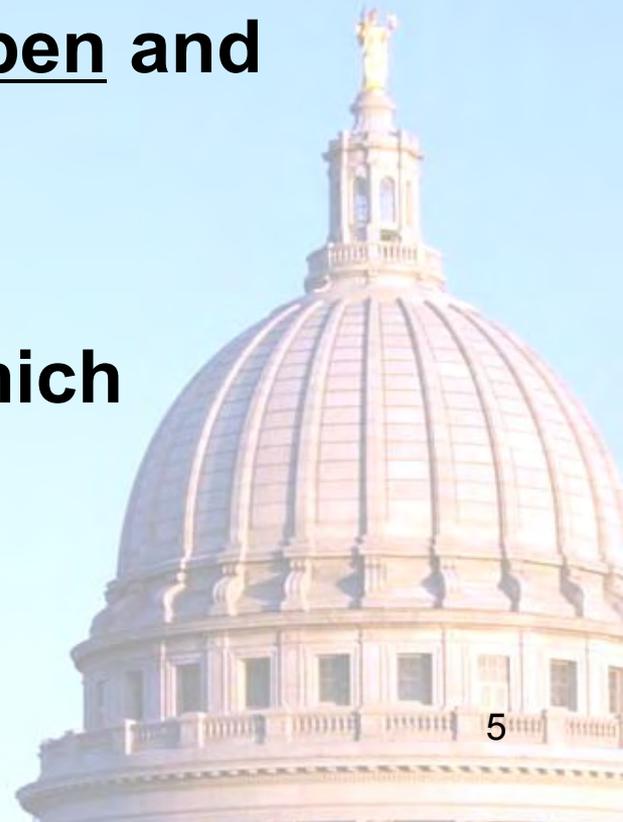
**WI Dept. of Justice**

**WISCONSIN  
OPEN MEETINGS LAW  
11 OCTOBER 2013**



# In general, the OML requires that all meetings of governmental bodies:

- must be preceded by public notice; and
- must be held in a place that is open and reasonably accessible to all members of the public;
- except in limited situations in which a closed session is specifically authorized.



# WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT of JUSTICE

ATTORNEY GENERAL *J.B. Van Hollen*



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Attorney General Van Hollen invites the public to register now for this year's free seminars on the public records and open meetings laws. In-person seminars will be offered in Madison and Pewaukee; webinars accessible from computers anywhere also will be offered. More information, along with registration links, is located [here](#).



## HEROIN

### A DANGEROUS EPIDEMIC

Traditionally thought of as a problem confined to big cities, desperate people and dark alleys, heroin has found a new foothold in Wisconsin's small towns and suburban communities.



### HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human Trafficking is a crime that involves obtaining or maintaining the labor or services of another through the use of force, fraud or coercion. Trafficked victims are...



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---

The Fly Effect - the Fly Effect  
<http://t.co/M5724Cq776> via @youtube  
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BACKGROUND CHECK & CRIMINAL HISTORY



heroin has found a new foothold in Wisconsin's small towns and suburban communities.

another through the use of force, fraud or coercion. Trafficked victims are...



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**OPEN GOVERNMENT**  
The Open Meetings Law and Public Records Law endeavor to open the workings of government to the public, shed light on government actions and, in the process, strengthen our democracy.



**PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN**  
In September 1998, the U.S. Department of Justice began a national Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force program to...



### SITE NAVIGATION

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## OPEN GOVERNMENT

Wisconsin's open government laws promote democracy by ensuring that all state, regional and local governments conduct their business with transparency. Wisconsin citizens have a right to know how their government is spending their tax dollars and exercising the powers granted by the people. This page is a resource for all Wisconsinites to understand and exercise their right to access their government.

### Register for our 2013 Public Records and Open Meetings Seminars!

Public Records & Open Meetings	October 11, 2013	9:00 a.m. – noon	Madison
Public Records & Open Meetings	October 29, 2013	9:00 a.m. – noon	Pewaukee
Open Meeting	October 31, 2013	9:00-10:30 a.m., followed by question and answer period	Webinar
Public Records	October 31, 2013	1:00-2:30 p.m., followed by question and answer period	Webinar

*These seminars are open to the public, free of charge. Registration will begin September 3, 2013, [here](#).*

## OPEN MEETINGS LAW

Wisconsin's Open Meetings Law, enacted in 1976, attempts to promote openness in government and to provide Wisconsin citizens with an opportunity to observe and educate themselves about their government's operations.

### Resources

- Compliance Guide, 2010 (pdf)
- PowerPoint Presentation, 2012 (ppt)
- Webinar, 2011 (wmv)
- Wisconsin Open Meetings Law, Wis. Stat. §§ 19.81 to 19.98

## PUBLIC RECORDS LAW

Wisconsin's Public Records Law took much of its present form in 1981 and is in place to provide the public with reasonable access to public records at reasonable costs.

### Resources

- Compliance Outline, 2012 (pdf)
- PowerPoint Presentation, 2012 (ppt)
- Attorney General's Welcome (wmv)
- Webinar, 2011 (wmv)
- Webinar-Questions & Answers, 2011 (pdf)
- Wisconsin Public Records Law, Wis. Stat. §§ 19.31 to 19.39

## CONTACT

If you have comments or questions about these laws that are not addressed in the resources on this website, please contact the State Programs, Administration and Revenue (SPAR) Unit's lead legal secretary at (608) 266-3952. Information about your question or concern will be obtained, and one of the unit's attorneys will be in contact with you.

You may also write to SPAR at:  
Wisconsin Department of Justice  
Legal Services Division  
P.O. Box 7857  
Madison, WI 53707-7857

When writing, please clearly identify whether your concern relates to open meetings or public records, so that your correspondence is routed appropriately. Also, please enclose copies of related correspondence and other documents that will assist in understanding your concerns.

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- CRIMINAL APPEALS UNIT
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# WISCONSIN OPEN MEETINGS LAW

A COMPLIANCE GUIDE

2007

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
ATTORNEY GENERAL J.B. VAN HOLLEN

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- STATUTES CITED

## A. Definition Of "Governmental Body"

### 1. Entities that are governmental bodies

#### a. State or local agencies, boards and commissions

The definition of "governmental body" includes a "state or local agency, board, commission, committee, council, department or public body corporate and politic created by constitution, statute, ordinance, rule or order." Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1). This provision focuses on the manner in which a body was created, rather than on the type of authority the body possesses. Purely advisory bodies created by constitution, statute, ordinance, rule or order are therefore subject to the law. See *State v. Swanson*, 92 Wis. 2d 310, 317, 284 N.W.2d 655 (1979).

The definition includes state or local agencies, boards, commissions and bodies created by the constitution and statutes of the State of Wisconsin, including condemnation commissions created by Wis. Stat. § 32.03, as well as local bodies created by county, city, village or town ordinance. It does not include bodies created solely by federal constitution, statute or rule.

State or local bodies created by "rule or order" are also included in the definition. The term "rule or order" has been liberally construed to include any directive, formal or informal, creating a body and assigning it duties. 78 Op. Att'y Gen. 67, 68-69 (1989). This includes directives from governmental bodies, presiding officers of governmental bodies, or certain governmental officials, such as county executives, mayors or heads of a state or local agency, department or division. See 78 Op. Att'y Gen. 67.

The Wisconsin Attorney General has concluded that the following are state or local agencies, boards, commissions or bodies and thus are "governmental bodies" subject to the open meetings law:

- An advisory committee appointed by the Natural Resources Board, the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, or a District Director, Bureau Director or Property Manager of that department. 78 Op. Att'y Gen. 67
- A county board of adjusters. Gaylord Correspondence, June 11, 1984.
- A citizen's advisory committee appointed by a county executive. Jacques Correspondence, January 26, 2004.
- A public inland lake protection and rehabilitation district established by a county or municipality. DuVall Correspondence, November 5, 1986.
- A planning commission or zoning board of appeal. Gellerman Correspondence, May 7, 1991.
- A library board created by local ordinance. Edwards Correspondence, December 20, 1993.
- A citizen's advisory group appointed by the mayor. Funkhouser Correspondence, March 17, 1983.
- A municipal public utility commission managing a city-owned public electric utility. 65 Op. Att'y Gen. 243 (1976).
- A town board, but not an annual town meeting. 66 Op. Att'y Gen. 237 (1977).
- A committee appointed by the school superintendent to consider school library materials. Staples Correspondence, February 10, 1981.



to section 66.30(5), section 66.30(2) provides that, "each [municipality] may act under the contract to the extent of its lawful powers and duties."

You do not indicate whether, under Michigan law, Menominee County, Michigan, has the authority to fund the cost of treatment for any or all individuals transported to Marinette County for emergency medical care. However, to the extent that such authority exists, Marinette County may contract with Menominee County pursuant to section 66.30(5) for reimbursement for the cost of care and treatment of those individuals for whom Marinette County has been assuming financial responsibility.

For the reasons indicated, I therefore conclude that it would be inadvisable to treat individuals transported across state lines for emergency medical care differently than other individuals when determining whether emergency detention proceedings should be initiated pursuant to section 51.15. I further conclude that, while section 51.15(7) does not authorize contractual agreements with counties outside of Wisconsin, sections 51.75(11), 51.87(3) and 66.30(5) each contain a legal mechanism through which financial or other responsibility for the care and treatment of individuals from such counties may be transferred or shared under certain specified circumstances.

DJH:FTC

*Natural Resources, Department Of; Open Meeting; Department of Natural Resources advisory committees that have at least some members who are not officers or employees of the DNR and that are appointed by the board, the secretary, district directors, bureau directors or property managers are subject to the open meetings law. OAG 13-89*

April 28, 1989

CARROLL D. BESADNY, *Secretary*  
*Department of Natural Resources*

You have asked for my advice on the applicability of the open meetings law to Department of Natural Resources advisory committees.

As you point out, the department has a variety of advisory committees. Some committees are created by statute, such as the snowmobile recreation council created by section 15.347(7), Stats., whose members are appointed by the Governor with the advice and consent of the Senate, and the off-the-road vehicle advisory council created by section 15.347(11), whose members are appointed by the natural resources board. Other advisory committees may be appointed by a department district director, bureau director or property manager who wants to learn about public concerns regarding a specific activity. An example of such a committee was the voluntary aquatic nuisance control review panel composed of citizens appointed by a bureau director. The panel was designed to provide citizen and local government advice to the department assessment of the effect on the public of program changes. Also, the Winnebago comprehensive planning project used several committees. Department employees served on some of those committees along with citizens. All the committees discussed and referred to in this opinion have at least some members who are not officers or employees of the DNR.

The open meetings law applies to a governmental body, as that term is defined in section 19.82(1):

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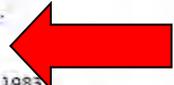
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**STATE OF WISCONSIN  
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

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**Assistant Attorney General**  
**608/266-8690**  
**FAX 608/267-2223**

December 20, 1993

Mr. Wayne S. Edwards  
Superintendent  
Gale-Ettrick-Trempealeau School District  
Post Office Box 4000  
Galesville, Wisconsin 54630

Dear Mr. Edwards:

The attorney general has asked me to reply to your request for advice on the open meetings law. You enclosed a copy of the minutes from a Trempealeau Village Board (Village Board) meeting that indicates that the Village Board went into closed session under section 19.85(1)(b) and (c) of the Wisconsin statutes for the purpose of doing business "regarding the Library Board & the Friends of the Library." You also enclosed an agenda for a meeting of the Village Board Personnel Committee (Personnel Committee) indicating that the committee would go into closed session under section 19.85(1)(c) "for the purpose of considering . . . appointment to [the] Library Board."

You appear to be concerned that it may not have been proper for the Village Board or the Personnel Committee to convene in closed session under section 19.85(1)(b) and (c) for the purpose specified in the Village Board meeting minutes and Personnel Committee agenda. Your first question is whether library board members are considered "employees" for purposes of section

The most important note you'll take during this presentation:

**Connie @ DOJ:  
(608) 266-3952**



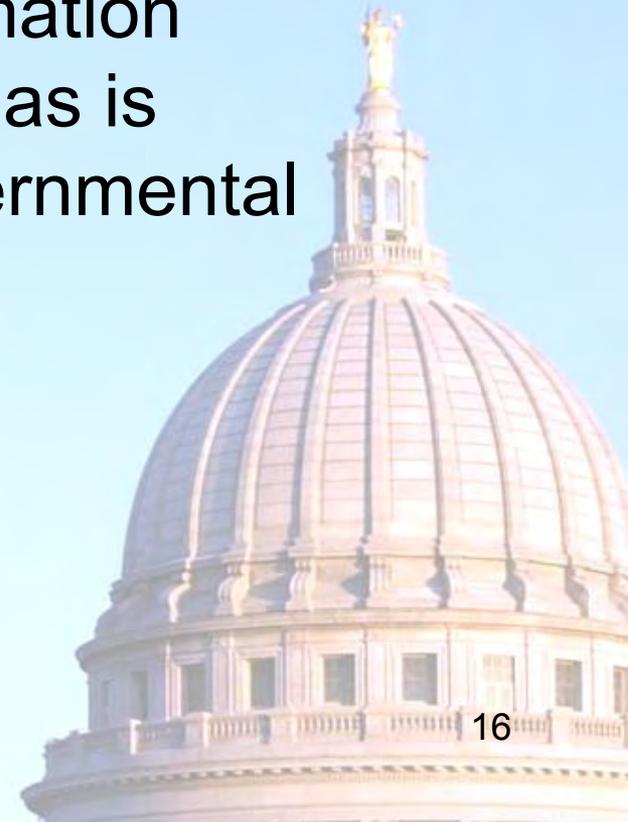
# PUBLIC POLICY

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“In recognition of the fact that a representative government of the American type is dependent upon an informed electorate, it is declared to be the policy of this state that the public is entitled to the fullest and most complete information regarding the affairs of government as is compatible with the conduct of governmental business.”

---Sec. 19.81(1), Wis. Stats.



Open meetings law is to be broadly interpreted to promote the policy of openness.

--- Sec. 19.81(4), Wis. Stats.

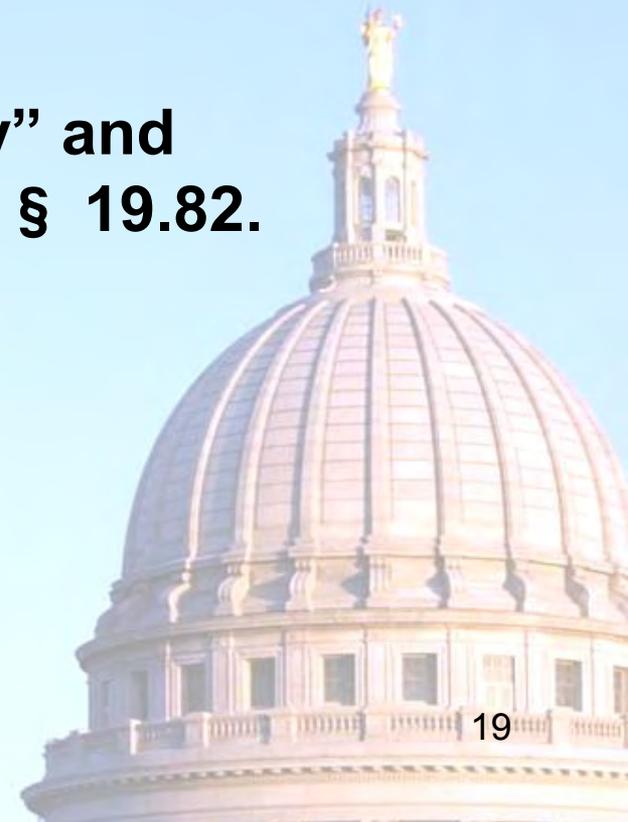


- On close questions, courts will prefer an interpretation of the law that favors open government.
- Courts disfavor any interpretation that would facilitate evasion of the policy of openness.



# When Does the Open Meetings Law Apply?

- It applies to *meetings of governmental bodies*.
- The key terms, “governmental body” and “meeting,” are defined in Wis. Stat. § 19.82.



# GOVERNMENTAL BODIES

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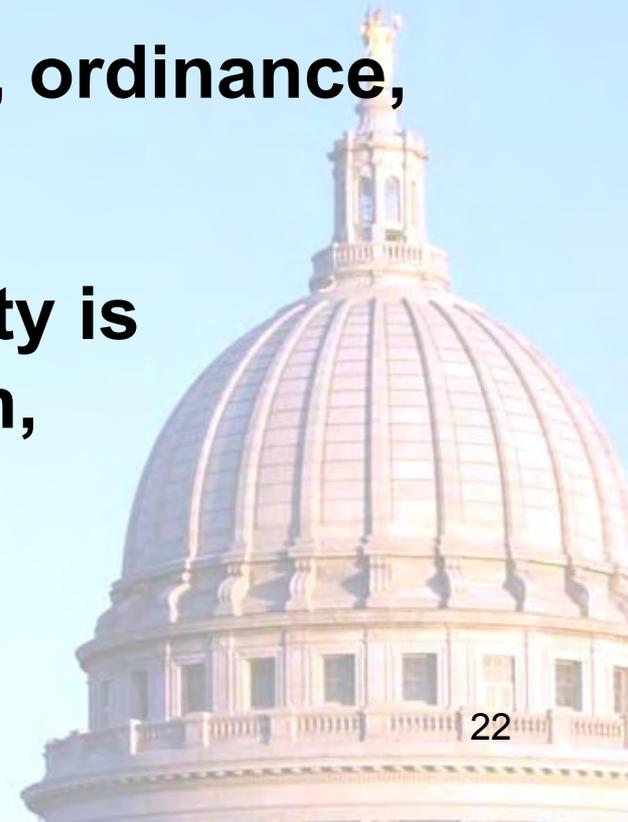
“Governmental body’ means a state or local agency, board, commission, council, department or public body corporate and politic created by constitution, statute, ordinance, rule or order. . .”

---Sec. 19.82(1), Wis. Stats.



# Translation:

- **Any kind of collective governmental entity (whether at a state or local level)**
- **Created by constitution, statute, ordinance, rule or order**
- **Without regard to what that entity is called—*i.e.* a board, commission, committee, council, etc.**



# Collective Governmental Entity

- Must be a group of people.
- Does not include a single, individual government official.



# Collective Governmental Entity

- **Must have a collective identity and purpose.**
- **A group with a determinate membership and an expectation that it will act collectively in relation to some subject of governmental business.**
- **Does not include an *ad hoc* gathering.**



**“ . . . created by constitution, statute, ordinance, rule or order”**

- **A governmental body is not defined in terms of the kind of power it wields, but rather in terms of how it is created.**



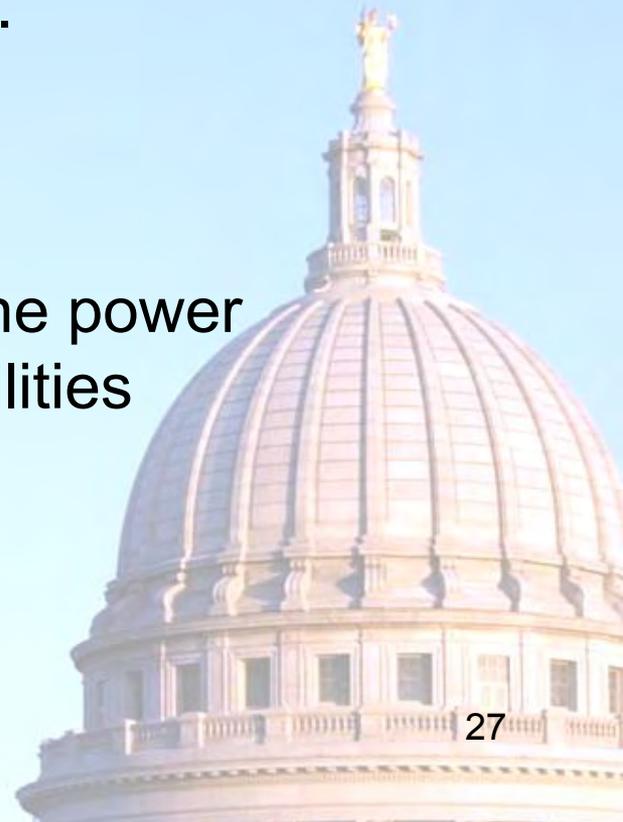
How can you determine whether a body is created by constitution, statute, ordinance, or rule?

**Look it up.**



# Governmental bodies created by **order**.

- An order can include any directive—whether formal or informal—that creates a body and assigns it some governmental responsibilities.  
---*See 78 Op. Att'y Gen. 67 (1989).*
- Such a directive may be issued by any governmental official or entity that has the power to delegate the governmental responsibilities in question.

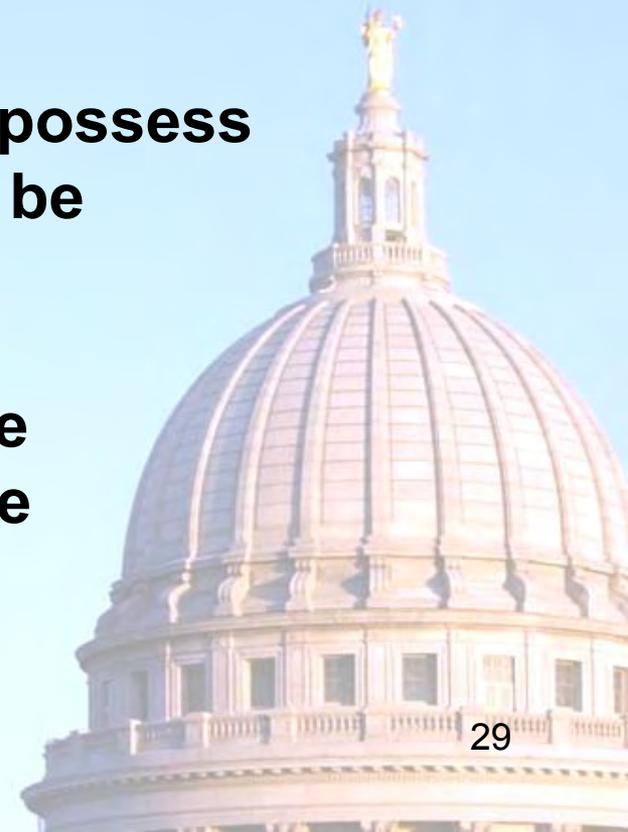


**Warning:** This is a very fact-specific standard, so there are no bright-line rules.

Pages 2-3 of the DOJ Open Meetings Law Guide contain a list of many of the kinds of entities that DOJ has advised are governmental bodies.

# Advisory Bodies

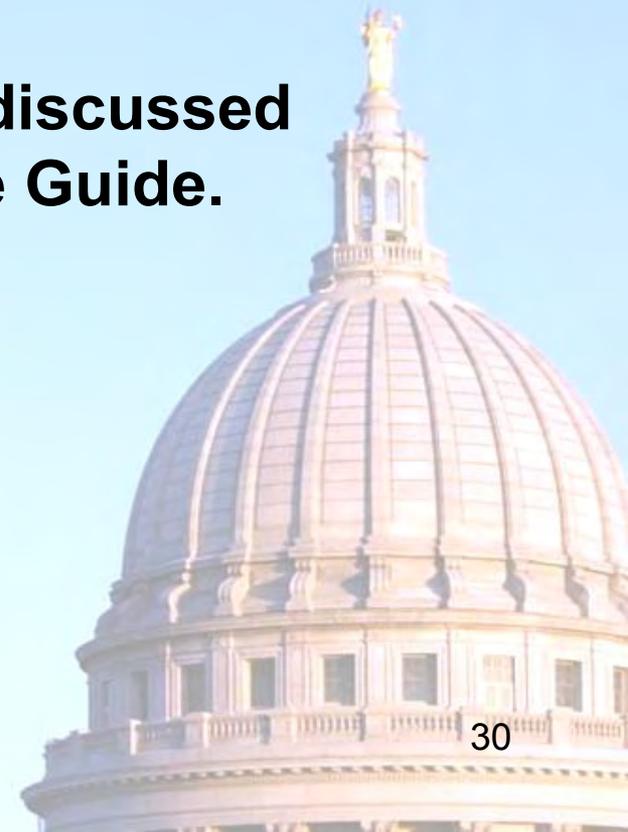
- The definition of “governmental body” includes purely advisory bodies.  
---See *State v. Swanson*, 92 Wis. 2d 310, 284 N.W.2d 655 (1979).
- A governmental body does not have to possess final decision-making power in order to be subject to the open meetings law.
- What matters is the manner in which the body was created, rather than the nature of its authority.



# **Administrative Staff**

**A governmental body generally does not include a group of administrative staff of a government agency.**

**This is a highly fact-specific issue. It is discussed further on page 6 of the DOJ Compliance Guide.**



# Subunits of Governmental Bodies

**Formally constituted subunits of a governmental body are also subject to the open meetings law.**



# Subunits of Governmental Bodies

A “subunit” is a body that is:

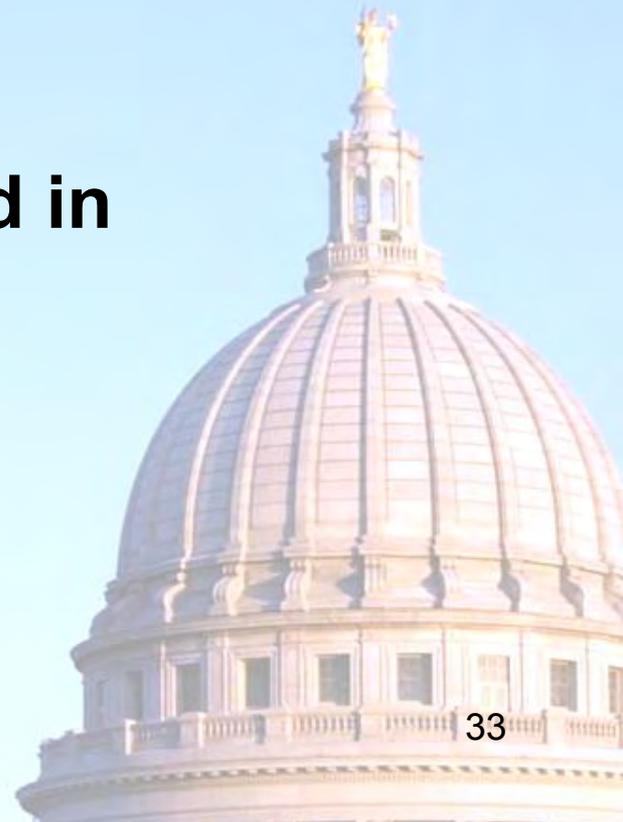
- **created by a parent body; and**
- **composed exclusively of members of the parent body**
- **e.g. a committee of a municipal board or a subcommittee.**  
**--See 74 Op. Att’y Gen. 38, 40 (1985).**



# **Governmental & Quasi-Governmental Corporations**

**A “governmental body” also includes governmental or quasi-governmental corporations.**

**Neither of those terms is defined in the statutes.**



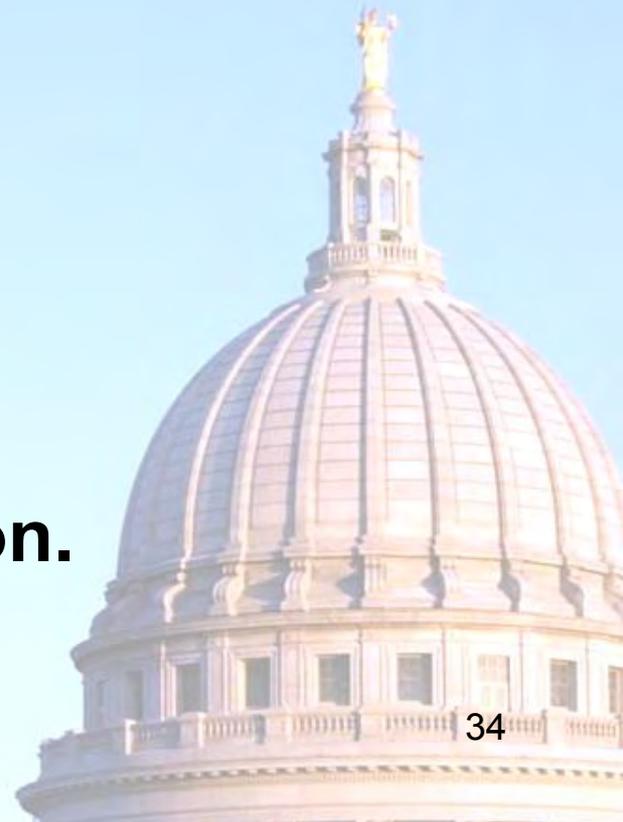
# Governmental Corporations

A governmental corporation is a corporation that:

- has a public purpose

and

- is established directly by government pursuant to some specific legislative authorization.

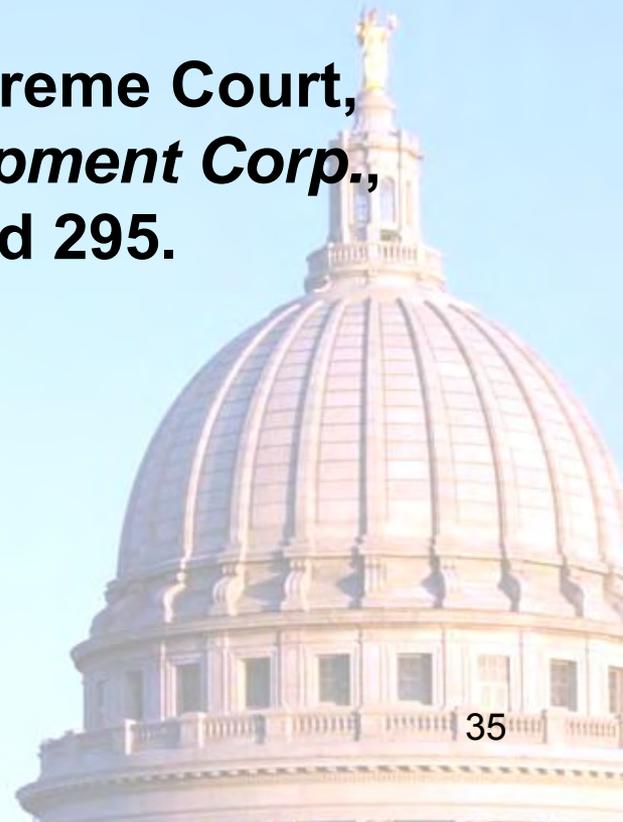


# Quasi-Governmental Corporations

What is a quasi-governmental corporation?

There is no simple answer to this question.

For discussion by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, see *State v. Beaver Dam Area Development Corp.*, 2008 WI 90, 312 Wis. 2d 84, 752 N.W.2d 295.

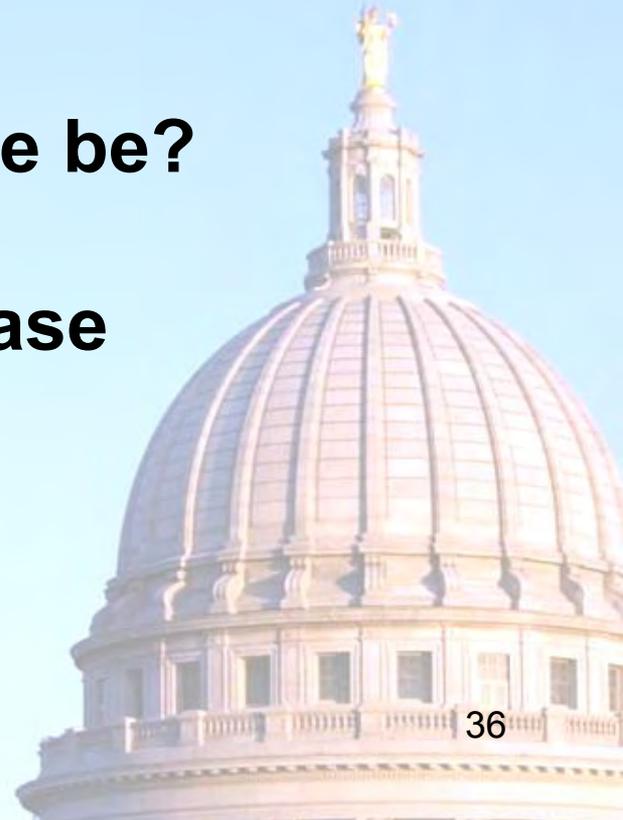


# Quasi-Governmental Corporations

Quasi-governmental corporations are private corporations that closely resemble a governmental corporation in function, effect, or status.

How close must the resemblance be?

Supreme Court said that each case must be decided on its own particular facts, under the totality of the circumstances.



# Quasi-Governmental Corporations

Factors considered by the Supreme Court look at the extent to which the corporation is more public or more private with regard to its:

- functions
- funding
- appearance
- control
- record keeping

The Court emphasized, however, that the list of factors is open-ended and no single factor is decisive.



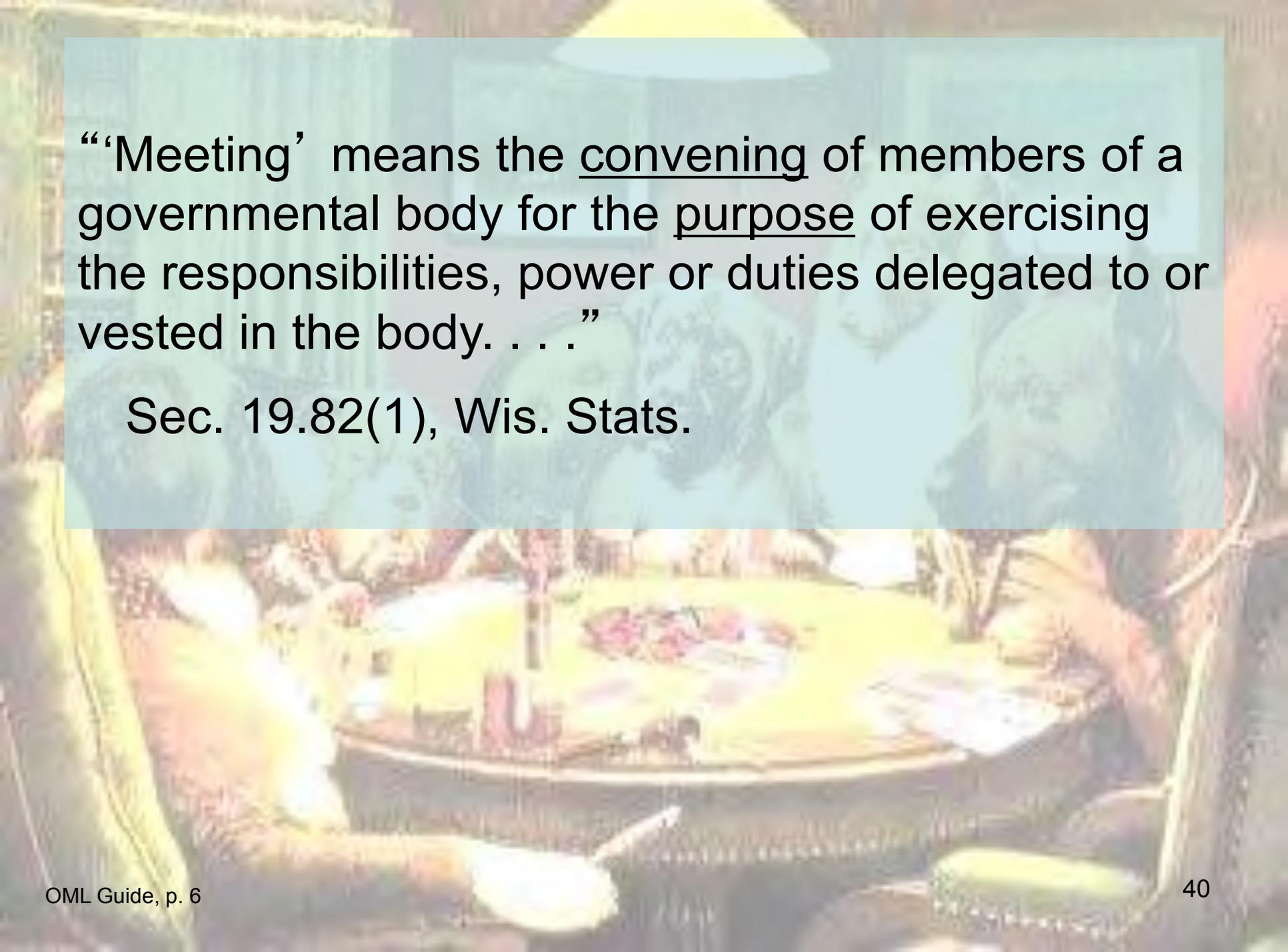
# Governmental Bodies

**Conclusion: Determining whether a particular entity is or is not a governmental body is a highly fact-specific question for which there often is no simple, bright line answer.**

**You should learn to identify the important issues and ask the right questions, so you can effectively seek assistance, when needed.**

# MEETINGS



A group of people in a meeting room, with a semi-transparent text box overlaid on top. The text box contains the definition of a meeting and a reference to Wisconsin Statutes.

“‘Meeting’ means the convening of members of a governmental body for the purpose of exercising the responsibilities, power or duties delegated to or vested in the body. . . .”

Sec. 19.82(1), Wis. Stats.

# Meetings: Key Concepts: The *Showers* Test

The Wisconsin Supreme Court has established a two-part test, encompassing two requirements:

- the purpose requirement

and

- the numbers requirement.

---*State ex rel. Newspapers v. Showers*, 135 Wis. 2d 77, 398 N.W.2d 154 (1987).

# Meetings: Key Concepts: The *Showers* Test

A meeting occurs whenever:

- (1) Members convene for the purpose of conducting governmental business *and*
- (2) The number of members present is sufficient to determine the body's course of action.

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Purpose” Requirement

**“Conducting governmental business” is an expansive concept that is not limited to formal or final decision making.**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Purpose” Requirement

**“Conducting governmental business” includes:**

- preliminary decisions
- discussion
- information gathering
- interaction among members is not required

---*State ex rel. Badke v. Greendale Village Bd.*, 173 Wis. 2d 553, 572, 494 N.W.2d 408 (1993).

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Numbers” Requirement

**Q: How many members must gather to constitute a meeting?**

**A: A sufficient number to determine a course of action by the body.**

**Warning: This number is not necessarily equal to a majority of the membership or to a quorum of the body.**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Numbers” Requirement

A sufficient number of members to determine a body’s course of action can refer either to:

- the affirmative power to pass an action, or
- the negative power to defeat an action.
- The latter number is sometimes referred to as a “negative quorum.”

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Convening” of Members

- Members must convene for there to be a meeting.
- Not limited to face-to-face gatherings or physical presence together
- Includes situations in which members are able to effectively communicate with each other and exercise the body’s authority

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Convening” of Members

If members communicate without physically gathering together, the key question is:

*To what extent do their communications resemble a face-to-face exchange?*

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Convening” of Members

## Written correspondence:

- **Circulation of one or more written documents among members of a body**
- **Generally a “one-way” communication**
- **Any responses spread out over time**
- **Courts are unlikely to find such written communication to be a “convening” of members.**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Convening” of Members

## Telephone conference calls, video conferences, etc.:

- **Permit instantaneous verbal interaction among members**
- **For practical purposes, equivalent to a physical gathering**
- **If it passes the purpose and numbers tests, then it is a “meeting.” 69 *Op. Att’y Gen.* 143 (1980).**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Convening” of Members

## Other forms of electronic messaging:

- Email
- Electronic discussion boards
- Instant messaging
- Social networking

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Convening” of Members

## Other forms of electronic messaging:

- May or may not implicate the open meetings law, depending on how they are used.
- Technology creates risk of private communications that should be conducted at public meetings.
- Caution is therefore advised.

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Convening” of Members

## Other forms of electronic messaging:

### Courts will likely consider:

- (1) The number of participants;
- (2) The number of communications;
- (3) The time frame;
- (4) The extent of conversation-like interaction.

# Meetings: Key Concepts: “Convening” of Members

**Other forms of electronic messaging:**

**To minimize the risk of violations:**

- (1) Use only for one-way transmissions;**
- (2) Do not send replies or minimize their content and distribution.**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: Serial or “Walking” Quorum

A “meeting” can sometimes result from a *series* of gatherings among members of a body.

When this occurs, it is known as a serial or “walking” quorum.

# Meetings: Key Concepts: Serial or “Walking” Quorum

## Elements of a “walking” quorum:

- A series of gatherings among groups of members
- Each smaller than a quorum in size
- Agreement to act uniformly
- In sufficient number to control the body

# Meetings: Key Concepts: Serial or “Walking” Quorum

**The “walking” quorum concept is intended to prevent circumvention of the law through the use of an agent or surrogate to obtain collective agreements of members outside a public meeting.**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: Serial or “Walking” Quorum

**Practical tip: Walking quorum issues are complex and fact-specific. Be prepared to consult with your legal counsel.**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: Social or Chance Gathering

A “meeting” does not include a social or chance gathering of members of a body, unless the gathering is intended to avoid compliance with the law.

---Wis. Stat. § 19.82(2).

# **Meetings: Key Concepts: Social or Chance Gathering**

**If one-half or more of the members are present at a gathering, they have the burden to prove that the gathering was social or chance and was not for the purpose of conducting governmental business.**

**---Wis. Stat. § 19.82(2).**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: Multiple or Overlapping Meetings

**Sometimes, a single gathering may include a “meeting” of more than one governmental body.**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: Multiple or Overlapping Meetings

**Suppose members of Body “A” attend a meeting of Body “B.”**

**The gathering may be considered a meeting of “A,” as well as “B,” if:**

- A quorum of members of “A” are present**
- The meeting involves a subject over which “A” has some authority.**

# Meetings: Key Concepts: Multiple or Overlapping Meetings

**Exceptions: The gathering is not a “meeting” of Body “A,” if:**

- **The members of “A” are present by chance and did not pre-plan their attendance**

**or**

- **All of the members of “A” present are also members of “B.”**

# What does the law require?

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## Notice



# General Notice Requirement

**“Every meeting of a governmental body shall be preceded by public notice . . .”**

**---Wis. Stat. § 19.83(1)**



# Manner of Giving Notice: Public Notice

Notice must be communicated to the public:

- By publication in a medium likely to give notice in the area

or

- By posting in one or more places likely to be seen by the public.

# Manner of Giving Notice: Public Notice

If public notice is given by publication, it must be paid publication.

This ensures that the notice is actually communicated to the public.

---65 Op. Att'y Gen. 250 (1976)

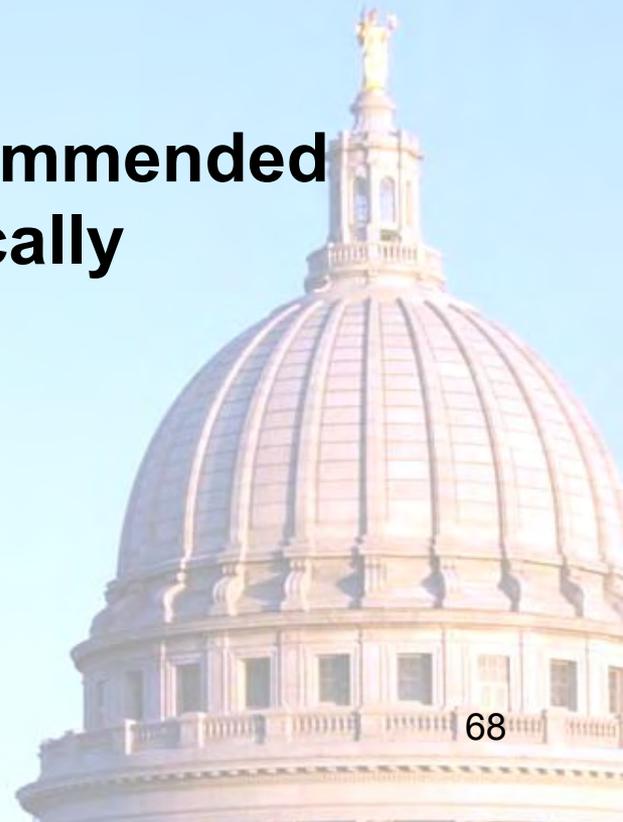


# Manner of Giving Notice: Public Notice

If public notice is given by posting, it must be posted in a place likely to give notice to the public.

Posting in three such places is recommended and is customary, but is not specifically required by statute.

---65 Op. Att’y Gen. 250 (1976)

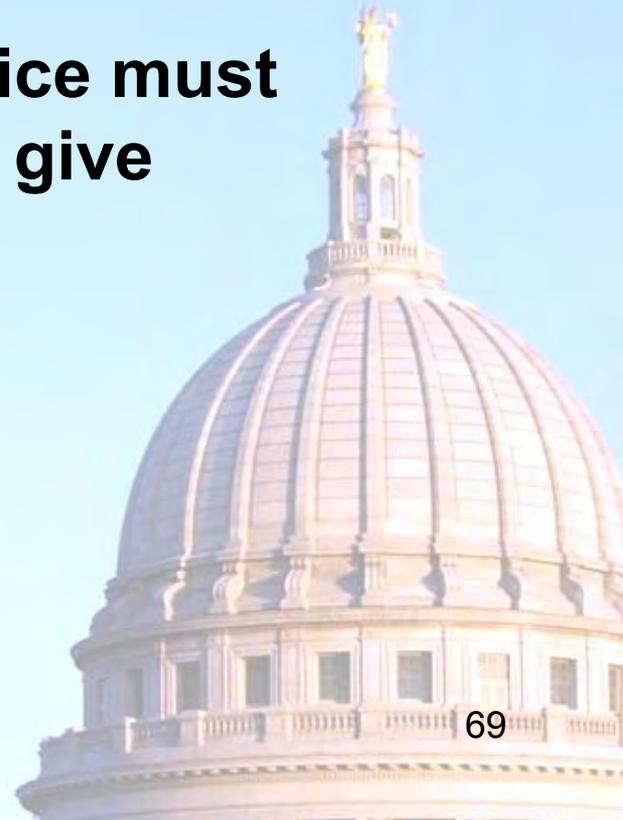


# **Manner of Giving Notice: Notice to Official Newspaper**

**Notice also must be given to the official newspaper for the community in question.**

**If there is no official newspaper, notice must be given to a news medium likely to give notice in the area.**

**--- Wis. Stat. § 19.84(1)(b)**

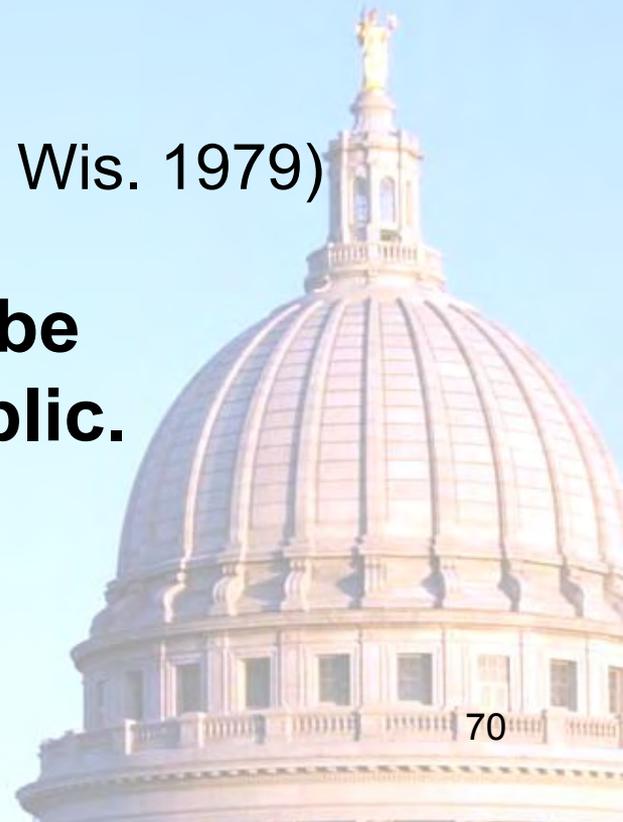


# Manner of Giving Notice: Notice to Official Newspaper

The official newspaper is not required to print the notice and the governmental body is not required to pay for publication.

---*Martin v. Wray*, 473 F. Supp. 1131 (E.D. Wis. 1979)

**Caution: *Public* notice still must be actually communicated to the public.**



# **Manner of Giving Notice: Notice to Requesting News Media**

**Notice also must be given to any news media that have filed a written request for notice.**

**--- Wis. Stat. § 19.84(1)(b)**

**News media cannot be charged a fee for meeting notices.**

**---77 Op. Att'y Gen. 312 (1988)**

# Content of Public Notice:

**The meeting notice must reasonably inform the public of the time, date, place, and subject matter of the meeting.**

**--- Wis. Stat. § 19.84(2)**



# Content of Public Notice: Subject Matter

**How detailed must a notice be in describing the subjects to be considered at a meeting?**

**The Wisconsin Supreme Court has said that the description must be reasonable under all of the relevant circumstances of the particular case.**

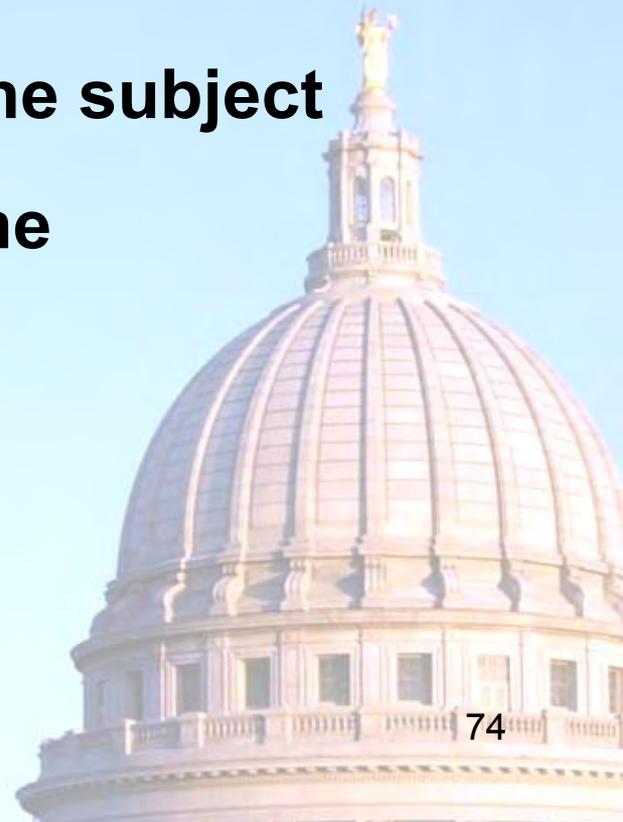
*---State ex rel. Buswell v. Tomah Area School District, 2007 WI 71, 301 Wis.2d 178, 732 N.W.2d 804*



# Content of Public Notice: Subject Matter

**Relevant circumstances include:**

- **The burden of providing more detail**
- **The degree of public interest in the subject**
- **Whether the subject is non-routine**



# Content of Public Notice: Generic Agenda Items

A notice should not use generic, uninformative subject-matter designations, such as:

- Old Or New Business
- Agenda Revisions
- Miscellaneous Business, etc.

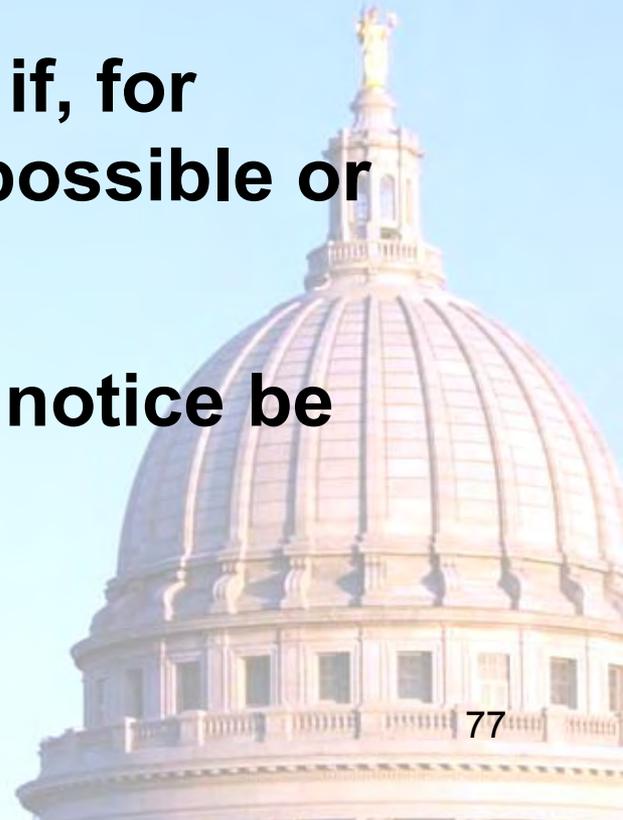
# **Content of Public Notice: Closed Session Notice**

**If a possible closed session is anticipated at the time when public notice is given, then the notice must include the subject matter of the closed session.**



# Timing of Public Notice:

- **Notice must be given at least 24 hours before the meeting.**
- **Shorter notice may be given only if, for good cause, 24-hour notice is impossible or impractical.**
- **In no case may less than 2 hours notice be given.**



# Separate Notice for Each Meeting

**Separate notice must be given for each meeting at a time and date reasonably close to the meeting.**

--- Wis. Stat. § . 19.84(4)



# Separate Notice for Each Meeting

- **An open-session meeting can be adjourned to a later time on the same date without treating the later session as a separate meeting, if an announcement is made to those present.**
- **If a meeting is adjourned or recessed to a different date, then the usual notice rules apply to the later session.**



# Responsibility for Giving Notice

- **The presiding officer is legally responsible for making sure that the notice requirements are met.**
- **Tasks may be delegated to staff, but the presiding officer is liable for any violation of the notice requirements.**



# What does the law require?

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## Open Sessions



# Open Session Requirements

**“[A]ll meetings of all state and local governmental bodies shall be publicly held in places reasonably accessible to members of the public and shall be open to all citizens at all times unless otherwise expressly provided by law.”**

**---Wis. Stat. § 19.81(2)**



# Open Session Requirements

**“‘Open session’ means a meeting which is held in a place reasonably accessible to members of the public and open to all citizens at all times. . . .”**

**---Wis. Stat. § 19.82(3)**



# Open Session Requirements: Public Accessibility

**Public accessibility has three aspects:**

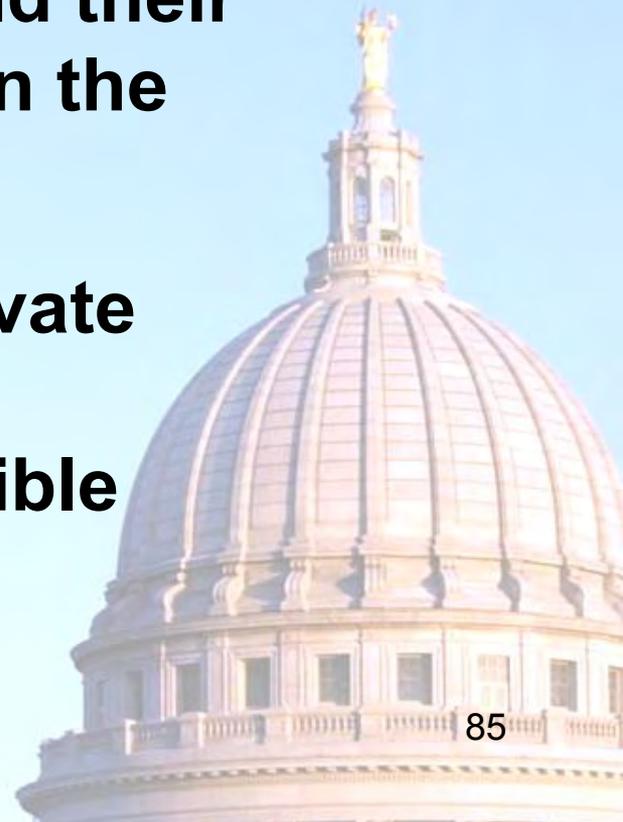
- **Physical location in the community**
- **Room size and acoustics**
- **Physical accessibility**



# Open Session Requirements: Public Accessibility

## Location:

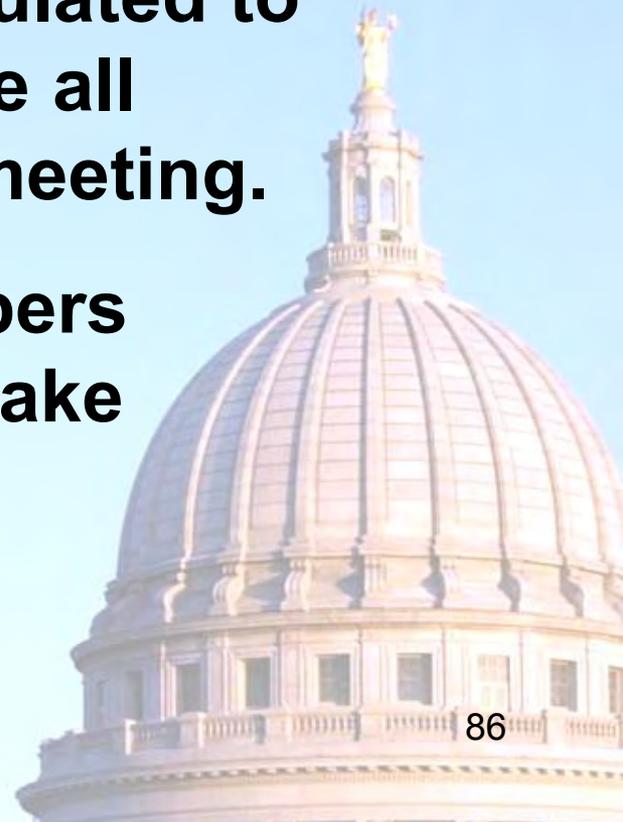
- **Governmental bodies should hold their meetings in places that are within the geographic area they serve.**
- **Meetings may not be held on private premises unless those premises are open and reasonably accessible to the public.**



# Open Session Requirements: Public Accessibility

## Room Size and Acoustics:

- Rooms must be reasonably calculated to be large enough to accommodate all citizens who wish to attend the meeting.
- Where acoustics are poor, members must take reasonable steps to make it possible for them to be heard.



# Open Session Requirements: Public Accessibility

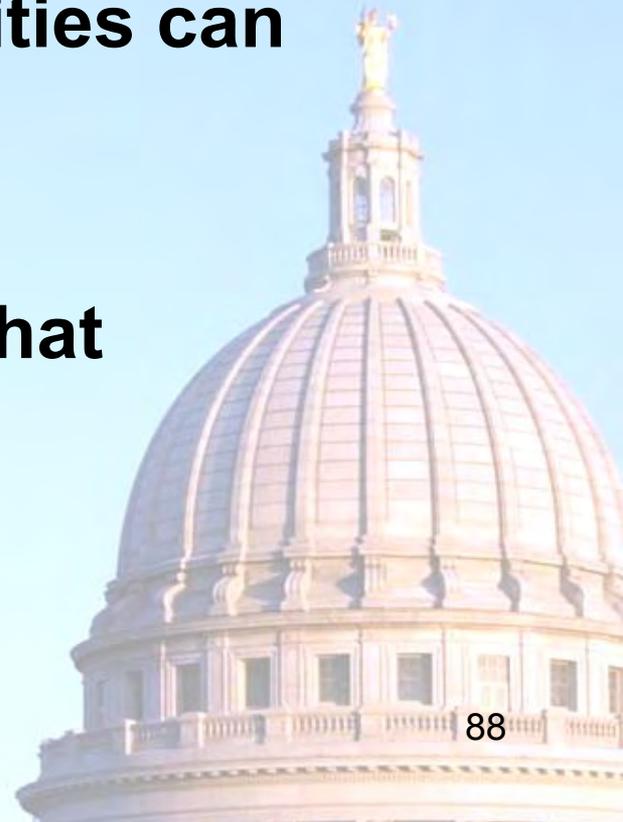
## Physical Accessibility:

- **Whenever a meeting is in open session, the room should be unlocked to permit free coming and going by the public.**
- **If doors must be closed to keep out noise, signs should be posted on the doors making it clear that the public may enter.**

# Open Session Requirements: Public Accessibility

## Accessibility for people with disabilities:

- State governmental bodies must meet in facilities that people with disabilities can access without assistance.  
---Wis. Stat. § 19.82(3).
- Local bodies are not subject to that statute, but nonetheless must provide *reasonable* access for people with disabilities.



# Open Session Requirements: Citizen Participation

- The open meetings law grants citizens the right to attend and observe open session meetings.
- The law does not require a governmental body to allow members of the public to speak or actively participate in the meeting.



# Open Session Requirements: Citizen Participation

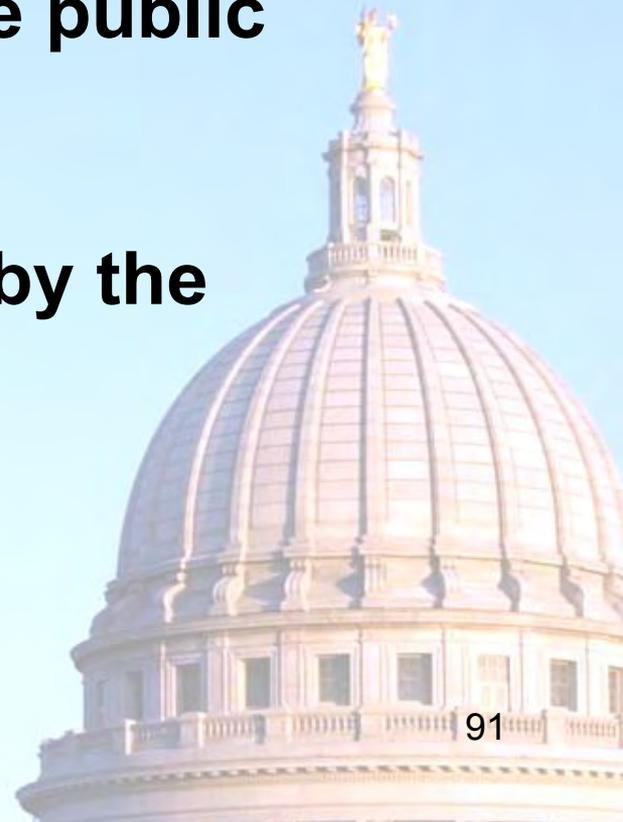
- The open meetings law permits a portion of an open meeting to be set aside as a public comment period.
- Public comment periods are not required.
- Such a period must be included on the meeting notice.

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.83(2) and § 19.84(2)

# Open Session Requirements: Citizen Participation

During a public comment period, a body:

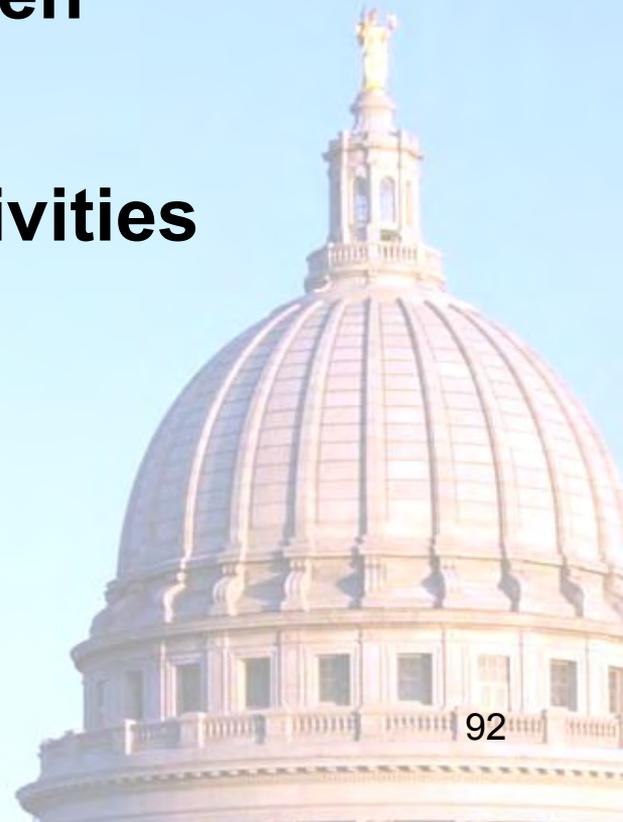
- may receive information from the public
- and
- may discuss any subject raised by the public
- but may not take formal action.



# Open Session Requirements: Recording

- **Bodies must make a reasonable effort to accommodate anyone who wants to record, film or photograph an open session.**
- **Recording or photographing activities may not disrupt the meeting.**

**--- Wis. Stat. § 19.90**



# Voting

- **Unless otherwise specifically provided, no secret ballots may be used except for electing officers of the body.**
- **Any member may require a roll-call vote.**  
--- **Wis. Stat. § 19.88(1) and (2)**



# Record Keeping

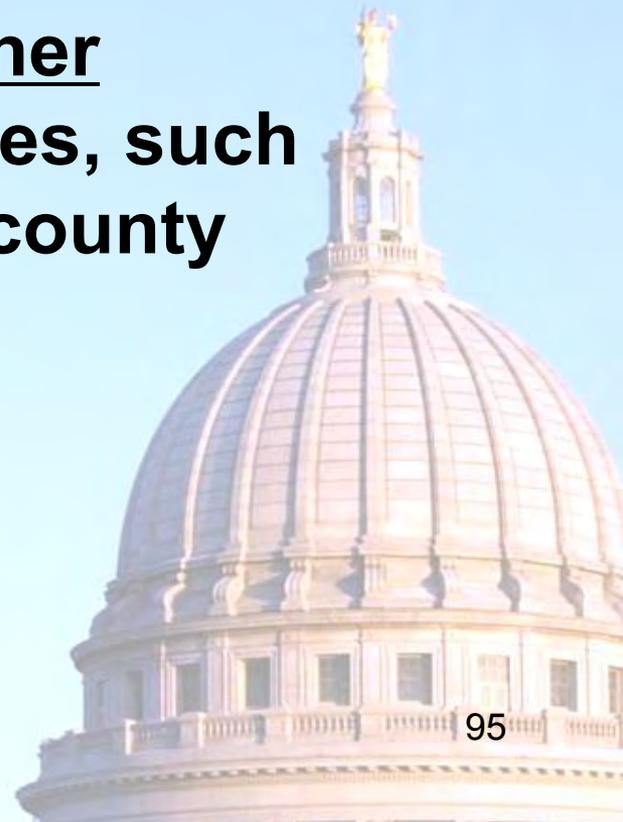
- **All motions and roll call votes must be recorded and preserved.**
- **Voting records must be open to public inspection to the extent required under the Public Records Law.**

**--- Wis. Stat. § 19.88(3)**



# Record Keeping

- The open meetings law does not itself require bodies to keep formal minutes of meetings.
- Minutes are often required by other statutes for certain types of bodies, such as city councils, village boards, county boards.



A photograph of three men in suits standing in a dimly lit room. The man on the left is seen from the back, gesturing towards the other two. The man in the center is looking towards the man on the right. The man on the right is looking down. In the background, there are window blinds with light filtering through. A yellow banner is overlaid across the middle of the image.

# Closed Sessions

# **Closed Sessions: Required Procedure**

- **Every meeting must begin in open session.**
- **To go into closed session, a motion must be made and carried in open session.**
- **The vote of each member must be recorded.**

**--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)**

# Closed Sessions: Required Procedure

Before a vote to go into closed session, the presiding officer must announce:

- The statutory exemption(s) authorizing the closed session
- and
- The nature of the business to be considered.

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)

# **Closed Sessions: Limited Scope**

**When a governmental body is in closed session, it must limit its discussion to the specific business for which the closed session was authorized and may not take up any other matters.**

**--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)**

# **Closed Sessions: Attendance**

**A governmental body has discretion to allow anyone to attend a closed session whom the body determines to be necessary for the business at hand.**

# Closed Sessions: Attendance

- **No duly elected or appointed member of a body may be excluded from any meeting of that body—whether closed or open.**
- **A member also may not be excluded from a meeting of a subunit of the body, unless the body has a rule to the contrary.**

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.89

# **Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects**

- **The specific subjects for which closed sessions are authorized are set out in the different subsections of Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1).**
- **For a more complete discussion of this topic, see DOJ Compliance Guide at pages 18-22.**

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

1. Deliberating about a case that has been the subject of a judicial or quasi-judicial trial or hearing before the body.

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(a)

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

**2. Considering dismissal, demotion, licensing or discipline of a public employee or the investigation of charges against the employee.**

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(b)

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

**If there is to be an evidentiary hearing or if action is to be taken in closed session, then the employee is entitled to actual notice and may demand that the hearing or action be conducted in open session.**

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(b)

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

**3. Considering employment, promotion, compensation or performance evaluation data of a public employee.**

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c)

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

- Applies to public employees and appointed officials over whom the governmental body exercises responsibility
- Does not apply to elected officials  
---76 Op. Att'y Gen. 276 (1987)
- Applies to specific individuals and does not allow closed discussion of more general policies  
---80 Op. Att'y Gen. 176 (1992)

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

**4. Considering sensitive personal information that would be likely to have a substantial adverse effect upon an individual's reputation.**

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(f)

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

**5. Deliberating or negotiating the purchase of public properties, the investing of public funds, or conducting "other specified public business" whenever competitive or bargaining reasons require a closed session.**

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(e)

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

**The burden is on the governmental body to show that competitive or bargaining interests require confidentiality.**

*---State ex rel. Citizens for Responsible Development v. City of Milton, 2007 WI App 114, 300 Wis.2d 649, 731 N.W.2d 640*

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

- The competitive or bargaining interests must belong to the government, not to a private party.
- Only those portions of a meeting may be closed which directly impact the competitive or bargaining interests.
- Closed discussion must be limited to matters that directly and substantially affect the government's competitive or bargaining interests.

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

**6. Conferring with legal counsel about strategy related to litigation.**

--- Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(g)

# Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects

- The attorney must be legal counsel for the governmental body.
- The attorney must be rendering advice about strategy related to litigation in which the body is or is likely to become involved.
- Other discussions with counsel should be held in open session.

# **Closed Sessions: Authorized Subjects**

**For additional provisions authorizing closed sessions, see Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) and p. 22 of the DOJ Compliance Guide.**

# Closed Sessions: Voting

**Under a prior version of the law, the Wisconsin Supreme Court held that a body can vote in closed session, if the vote is integral to the authorized subject of the closed session.**

*---State ex rel. Cities S.O. Co. v. Bd. of Appeals,*  
21 Wis.2d 516, 124 N.W.2d 809 (1963)

# Closed Sessions: Voting

**More recently, the Court of Appeals indicated that a body should vote in open session unless a closed vote is expressly authorized.**

--- *State ex rel. Schaeve v. Van Lare*,  
125 Wis.2d 40, 370N.W.2d 271 (Ct. App. 1985)

# Closed Sessions: Voting

- **The Court of Appeals did not discuss *Cities S.O. Co.* and the older decision remains binding precedent.**
- **A body may vote in closed session if the vote is an integral part of authorized closed deliberations.**
- **DOJ advises bodies to vote in open session unless that would compromise the purpose of the closed session.**

# **Closed Sessions: Reconvening in Open Session**

- **A body can return to open session after a closed session only if the meeting notice indicated this would happen.**
- **A body may adjourn directly from closed session without returning to open session.**

# Enforcement



# Enforcement Alternatives

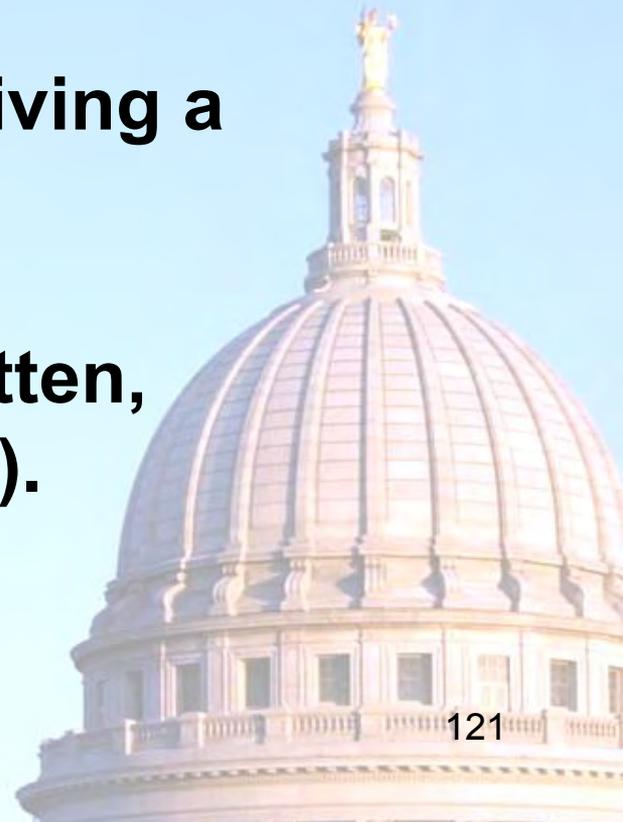
- **By the local District Attorney**
- **By the Attorney General**
- **By a private relator**

---Wis. Stat. § 19.97



# **Enforcement Alternatives: District Attorney**

- **The D.A. of the county in which the alleged violation occurred**
- **D.A. may enforce only after receiving a verified complaint**
- **A verified complaint must be written, signed, and sworn (i.e. notarized).**



# **Enforcement Alternatives: Attorney General**

- **Generally considers only complaints involving statewide matters**
- **Local complaints should be filed with the local D.A.**
- **Complaints to the A.G. should be submitted by U.S. mail.**



# Enforcement Alternatives: Private Relator

- **If D.A. fails to act within 20 days of receiving a verified complaint**
- **The complainant may commence an enforcement action on behalf of the state as a private relator**
- **If successful, the relator may recover attorney fees.**

---Wis. Stat. § 19.97(4)

# Enforcement : Penalties

**Civil forfeiture of \$25 to \$300 per violation for any member of a governmental body who:**

- **Knowingly attends a meeting held in violation of the open meetings law**
- **Otherwise violates the law.**

---Wis. Stat. § 19.96

# Enforcement : Penalties

**A member is not liable for attending an unlawful meeting if he/she makes or votes in favor of a motion to prevent the violation from occurring.**

---Wis. Stat. § 19.96

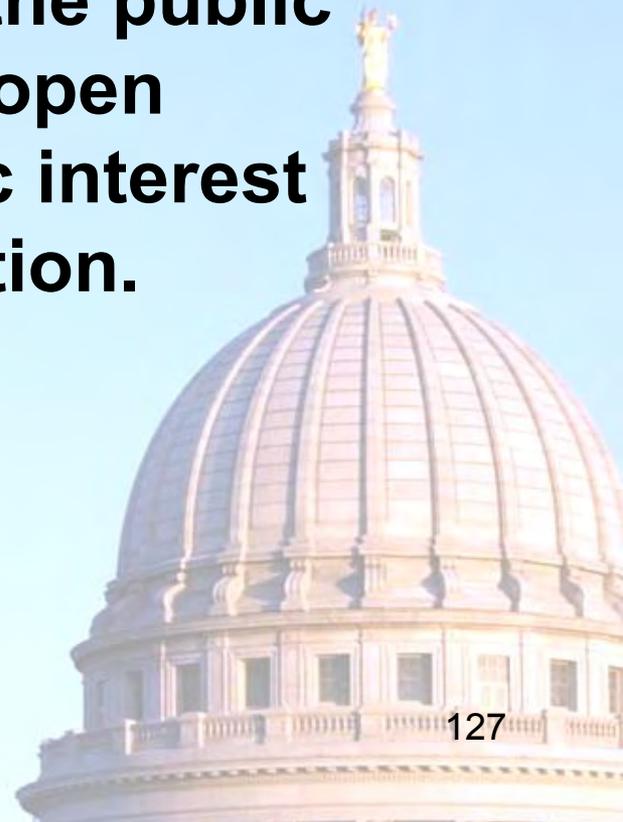
# **Enforcement : Penalties**

**Members of a body who—acting openly and in good faith—seek and rely upon the advice of the body’s official legal counsel may not be found liable for any violation.**



# Enforcement : Alternative Remedy

An action taken at an unlawful meeting may be voidable if the court finds that the public interest in the enforcement of the open meetings law outweighs the public interest in sustaining the validity of the action.



# Open Meetings Law

## Questions

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT *of* JUSTICE  
ATTORNEY GENERAL *J.B. Van Hollen*

