

# THE WISCONSIN PUBLIC RECORDS LAW

**Wisconsin Department of Justice  
Office of the Attorney General  
Office of Open Government**

Updated: October 2016



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# Introduction



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# Wisconsin Public Records Law

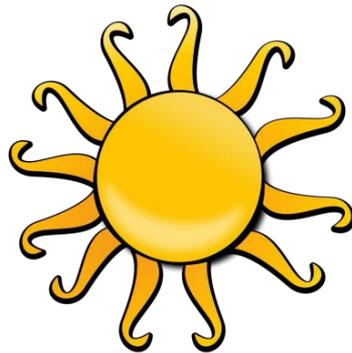
- Wis. Stat. §§ 19.31 to 19.39



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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



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# Public Records Request Process

- PRR received and forwarded to authority's records custodian
- Authority begins search for records
- Any responsive records are reviewed:
  - Is there a statutory or common law exemption from disclosure?
  - Authority applies public records balancing test
- Records are released with letter explaining any redactions



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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



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# Government Transparency

- “Transparency and oversight are essential to honest, ethical governance.”
- *John K. MacIver Inst. for Pub. Policy, Inc. v. Erpenbach*, 2014 WI App 49, ¶ 32, 354 Wis. 2d 61, 848 N.W.2d 862



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# Public Record Roles



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# “Authority”

- Defined in Wis. Stat. § 19.32(1) - any of specified entities having custody of a record
- Very similar to “governmental body” in Open Meetings law
- Includes quasi-governmental corporation
- Public records law obligations apply separately to each authority
- *Wis. Prof'l Police Ass'n v. Wis. Cnty. Ass'n*, 2014 WI App 106, 357 Wis. 2d 687 (unincorporated association is not an authority)



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# “Legal Custodian”

- Defined in Wis. Stat. § 19.33 - 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
  - Includes an elected assessor
  - A contracted assessor is not the custodian
- Other authorities to designate one or more positions
- Defaults are highest ranking officer and chief administrative officer, if any



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# “Legal Custodian,” continued

- All records belong to the authority (e.g., municipality); the assessor is a custodian of records
- Custodial services
  - Other authority staff may participate or assist
  - Helpful to establish an internal public records procedure



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# “Requester”

- Defined at Wis. Stat. § 19.32(3)
  - Generally, any person who requests to inspect or copy a record
- More limited rights for persons committed under mental health laws or incarcerated
  - Must be requesting records containing specific references to themselves or minor children



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# “Requester,” continued

- Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(am)
  - A requester has greater rights to inspect personally identifiable information about himself or herself



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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: Safety concerns may be relevant, but it is a fact-intensive issue determined on a case-by-case basis in the balancing test



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# Records

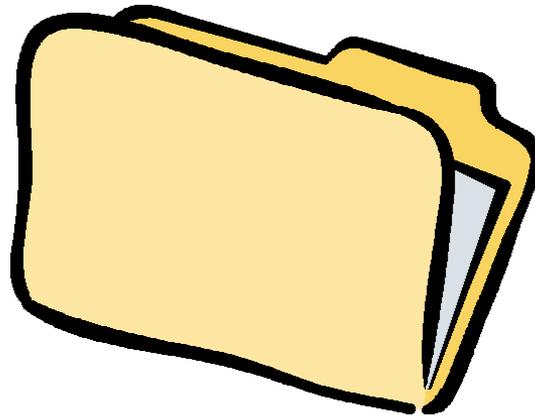


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# “Record”

“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)



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# Is it a Record?

- **NO:**

- 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



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# Is it a Record?

- YES:

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



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# Is it a Record?

- YES:

- Data in a database
- Social media
- Contractors' records
- Police body camera and dash camera video



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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



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

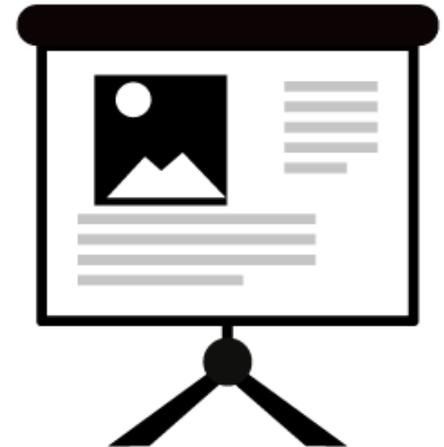
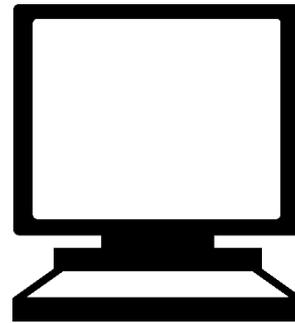
- These materials may be “records”
- Content determines whether something is a “record,” not the medium, format, or location
- Recommendation: Conduct a careful search of all relevant accounts
- Personal materials on the same private accounts are not subject to disclosure



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# Electronic Records

- Content not format
- Emails
- Database files
- PowerPoint presentations
- Audio and video
- Web-based documents
- Social media
- Cell phones, including texts



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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



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# Social Media, continued

- 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?



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# Communications to public officials

- Persons who communicate political views to their elected lawmakers should be prepared to see their names and views made public
- 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
- *John K. MacIver Inst. for Public Policy, Inc. v. Erpenbach*, 2014 WI App 49, 354 Wis. 2d 61



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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
  - Includes data and other electronic records
- *Juneau Cnty. Star-Times v. Juneau Cnty.*, 2013 WI 4, 345 Wis. 2d 122



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# Is it a Record?

- The bottom line is that content not format determines if something is a record

**CONTENT  
NOT  
FORMAT**



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# Submitting a Request



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# Sufficient Request

- A request need not be in writing; it may be verbal
- An authority may not require the use of a form
- “Magic words” are not required



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# Sufficient Request, continued

- Reasonably describes the information or records requested
- Reasonably specific as to time and subject matter
  - Important for requests involving electronic records
- Custodian should not have to guess what records the requester wants



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# Scope of Request

- A large number of responsive records—by itself—does not make a request too broad
- But 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



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# Submitting 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



October 3, 2016

Charlie Chairperson  
Cheese Town Board Chairperson  
250 Main Street  
Cheese Town, WI 53000

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 October 28, 2016, 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,

Ralph Requester  
123 Quarry Road  
Cheese Town, WI 53000

321 Quarry Road  
Cheese Town, WI 53000

October 3, 2016

Carly Clerk  
Town Clerk  
250 Main Street  
Cheese Town, WI 53000

Dear Ms. Clerk:

Pursuant to the Wisconsin Public Records Law, please send me copies of all 2015 Cheese 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 I 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 through September 15, 2015. I would prefer to receive the responsive records 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  
rebecca@internet.com  
555-1234

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# Processing a Request



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# Evaluating a Request

- Carefully assess to determine what is needed to respond
- Don't understand the request?
  - Contact the requester
    - Send a written summary of your understanding
    - Request clarification



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# Evaluating a Request, continued

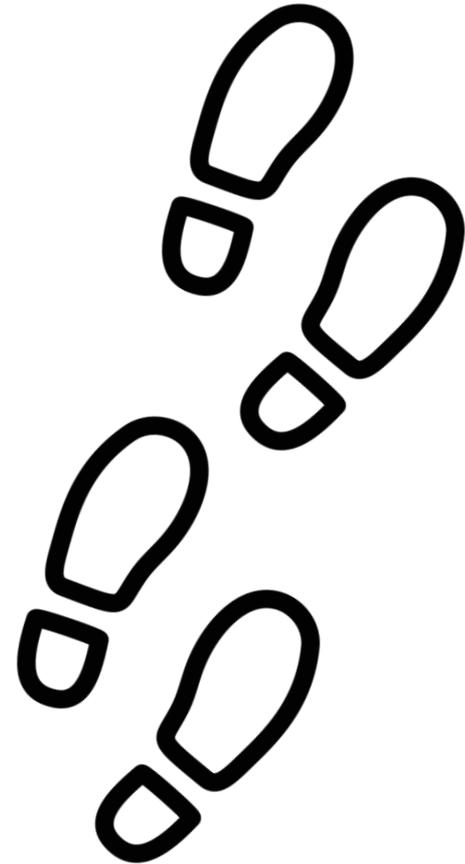
- Inform the requester about a large number of responsive records, or large estimated costs, and suggest/solicit alternatives
- Send the requester an acknowledgment and periodic status updates if the response will take some time



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# Four Steps

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



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# Step 1 – Does the Record Exist?

- Generally, only records that exist at the time of the request must be produced
  - To respond, an authority need not create new records
- Public records law does not require answering questions
  - However, if a request asks a question and an existing record answers the question, provide the record or inform the requester
- Continuing requests are not contemplated by the public records law



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# Step 1, continued

- Search for records that might be responsive
- If there are no responsive records, inform the requester
- *Journal Times v. Police & Fire Com'rs Bd.*, 2015 WI 56, 362 Wis. 2d 577, 866 N.W.2d 563: It is problematic to deny access to records on substantive grounds, then respond later that there are no responsive records



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## Step 2 – Absolute Right of Access

- Absolute Right - 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

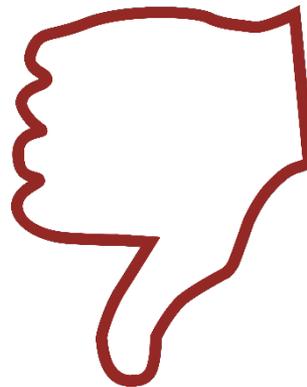


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# Step 3 – Absolute Denial of Access

## ■ Absolute Denial

- Can be located in public records statutes:
  - Information related to a current investigation of possible employee criminal conduct or misconduct
  - Plans or specifications for state buildings
- Can be located in other statutes or case law:
  - Patient health care records; pupil records



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# Step 4 - The Balancing Test

- Weigh the public interest in disclosure of the record against the public interest and public policies against disclosure
- Fact intensive; “blanket rules” disfavored
- Must conduct on case-by-case basis taking into consideration the totality of circumstances
- Identity of the requester and the purpose of the request are generally not part of the balancing test



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# Some Sources of Public Policies

- Policies expressed in other statutes
  - E.g., patient health care records, student records
- Court decisions
- Exemptions to open meetings requirements in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)
  - Only if there is a 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



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# Law Enforcement Considerations

- Presumption of complete public access – public’s right to know
- Crime victim rights expressed in statutes, constitutional provisions, and case law
  - Consideration of family of crime victims
- Protection of witnesses
  - Safety and security
  - “Chilling” future cooperation with law enforcement
- Children and juveniles



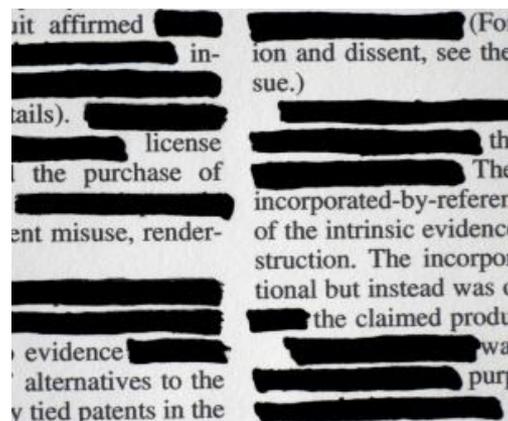
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# Redaction



# Redaction

- If part of a record is disclosable, that part must be disclosed
  - Wis. Stat. § 19.36(6)
- Non-disclosable portions must be redacted
- No specific way to redact: electronic redaction, black magic marker, cover up with white paper when photocopying



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# Redaction, continued

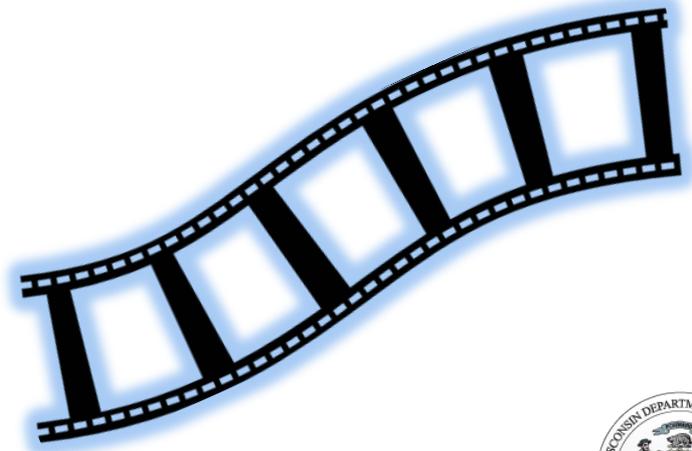
- **Redaction constitutes a denial of access to the redacted information**
  - Therefore subject to review by mandamus
- Effective July 1, 2016, certain personally identifiable and financial information required to be redacted from records filed with Wisconsin's circuit courts
  - See Wis. Stat. §§ 801.19, 801.20, 801.21



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# Redaction – Audio and Video

- Audio – accompanying video, dispatch recordings, etc.
  - Digital editing equipment
  - Partial redaction
- Video – security video, police body and dashboard cameras, etc.
  - Video blurring
  - Blacking out portions of video
- Technology
- Cost



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# Special Issues



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# Special Issues

- A prosecutor's files are not subject to public inspection under the public records law. *State ex rel. Richards v. Foust*, 165 Wis. 2d 429, 433-34, 477 N.W.2d 608, 610 (1991).
  - Law enforcement records: balancing test must be applied on a case-by-case basis
- Wis. Stat. § 19.36(8): Information identifying confidential informants must be withheld unless balancing test requires otherwise



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# Special Issues, continued

- Records related to children or juveniles:
  - Wis. Stat. ch. 48: Law enforcement records of children who are the subjects of such investigations or other proceedings are confidential with some exceptions. See Wis. Stat. § 48.396.
  - Wis. Stat. ch. 938: Law enforcement records of juveniles who are the subjects of such investigations or other proceedings are confidential with some exceptions. See Wis. Stat. § 938.396.
  - Access to other records regarding or mentioning children subject to general public records rules



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# Driver's Privacy Protection Act (DPPA)

- Federal statute enacted in 1994
- Purpose: limit release of an individual's personal information contained in driver's license record
- Concerns about threats from stalkers, criminals and states' practice of selling personal information to businesses



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# DPPA, continued

- Wisconsin Public Records Law and DPPA
  - Newspaper requested two accident reports and two incident reports from the City of New Richmond PD
    - PD provided redacted reports based on DPPA
  - Newspaper sued City of New Richmond alleging violation of public records law
  - *New Richmond News v. City of New Richmond*, 2016 WI App 43, 370 Wis. 2d 75, 881 N.W. 2d 339



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# DPPA, continued

- **Accident reports**: permitted to be released unredacted
  - DPPA exception allows. See 18 U.S.C. § 2721(b)(14).
- **Incident reports**: release of DMV information prohibited unless DPPA exception applies
  - Compliance with public records request not a “function”
- Information **verified** using DMV records is not protected by DPPA
  - Presents problem of determining how information was obtained



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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



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# Electronic Databases

- Direct access to electronic databases not required
- Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(k): reasonable restrictions on manner of access to original record if irreplaceable or easily damaged
- Wis. Stat. § 19.36(4): a computer program is not subject to examination or copying
  - However, the following is:
    - Input: Material used as input for computer program
    - Output: Material produced as product of computer program
- Requester, within reasonable limits, may request a data run to obtain requested information



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# Metadata

- No controlling Wisconsin precedent
  - A circuit court held metadata is not a record because it includes drafts, notes, preliminary computations, and editing information
  - Courts in other jurisdictions have held metadata must be disclosed in response to freedom of information laws
- Good rule of thumb: content determines whether it is a record, not the format



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# Responding to a Request



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# Format of Records

- Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(b), (c), (d): a copy substantially as readable/audible/good as the original
- *Wiredata, Inc. v. Village of Sussex*, 2008 WI 69, 310 Wis. 2d 397, 751 N.W.2d 736 (*Wiredata II*)
  - Whether records must be produced in requested format not squarely addressed
  - PDF fulfilled request for “electronic records” despite not having all the characteristics wanted by the requester
  - Sufficient to provide a copy of relevant data in an appropriate format
- Right to receive land information from a political subdivision in same format in which record is maintained



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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 enforcement action for mandamus under Wis. Stat. § 19.37(1) or by application to district attorney or Attorney General



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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





**Cheese Town Hall  
250 Main Street  
Cheese Town, WI 53005**

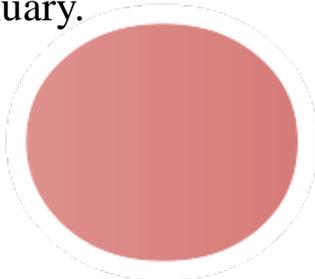
October 10, 2016

Ms. Rebecca Requester  
321 Quarry Road  
Cheese Town, WI 53000

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 January.



Thank you,

Carly Clerk  
Town Clerk

## **Clerk, Carly – Cheese Town**

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**From:** Clerk, Carly  
**Sent:** Monday, October 10, 2016, 10:08 AM  
**To:** rebecca@internet.com  
**Subject:** Response to 10/03/2016 public records request  
**Attachment:** quarryrecords.pdf

Dear Ms. Requester:

Attached are the records responsive to your October 3, 2016 public records request. I redacted home email addresses and home telephone numbers of the Town Board members pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 19.36(11). I also redacted purely personal information about sports activities of Town Board members' children 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*, 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., Cheese Town, 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.

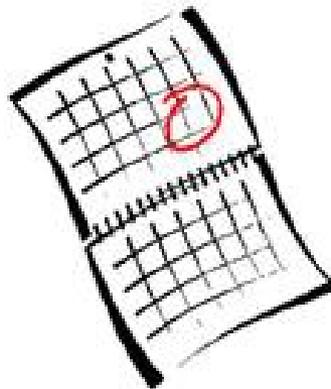
Thank you,

Carly Clerk  
Cheese Town Clerk

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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



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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
  - “Record subject” can try to stop disclosure in court
- Required by Wis. Stat. § 19.356(9)—officer or employee holding state or local public office
  - OAG-07-14 (October 15, 2014)
- Courtesy notice



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# Costs



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# Costs

- Actual, necessary, and direct costs only—unless otherwise specified by law
  - Copying and reproduction
    - Paper copies v. electronic copies
  - Location, if costs are \$50.00 or more
  - Mailing/shipping to requester
  - Others specified in Wis. Stat. § 19.35(3)



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# Permissible Charges

- Authorities **may not** charge for redaction costs
- Prepayment may be required if total costs exceed \$5.00
- Authority may choose to provide records for free or reduced charge



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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
- Keep careful records in order to support and calculate requests for payment of costs



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# Enforcement



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# Enforcement

- Wis. Stat. § 19.37
- Mandamus action to challenge:
  - Withholding a record or part of a record
  - Delay in granting access to record or part of record



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# Remedies

- Authority may be ordered to release records
- Attorney's fees and costs may be awarded if mandamus action was a cause of the release
- If a denial, delay or charge of excessive fees is found to be arbitrary and capricious:
  - Court may award punitive damages
  - Authority may be required to forfeit not more than \$1,000
    - Forfeitures enforced by action on behalf of state by the attorney general or district attorney



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# Other Statutes

- Wis. Stat. § 946.72: Tampering with public records and notices
- “Whoever with intent to injure or defraud destroys, damages, removes or conceals any public record is guilty of a Class H felony.”



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# Record Retention



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# Record Retention – Public Records Law

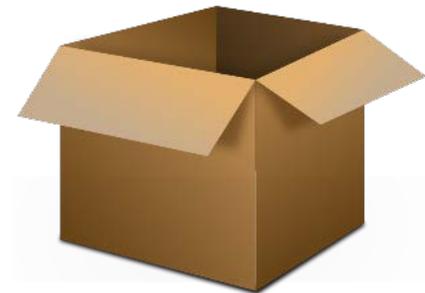
- Wis. Stat. § 19.35(5) - after receiving a request:
  - No destruction until request granted or until at least 60 days after request is denied
  - 90 days if requester is committed or incarcerated
  - No destruction during enforcement action



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# Record Retention – Other Statutes

- Records retention laws
  - State authorities: Wis. Stat. § 16.61
  - Local authorities: Wis. Stat. § 19.21
- Record Retention Schedules (RDAs)
  - Check for existing RDAs
- <http://publicrecordsboard.wi.gov/>
- Consult legal counsel



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# Record Retention, continued

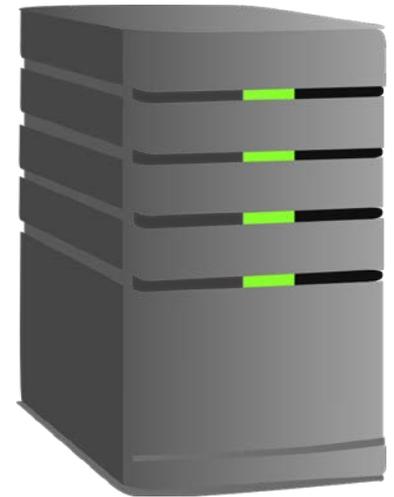
- Hard copies v. electronic copies
  - Copies of records in electronic formats permissible
  - State authorities: Wis. Stat. § 16.61(5)(a)
  - Local authorities: Wis. Stat. § 19.21(4)(c)
    - Local government unit or agency may provide for retention of records in electronic format
    - Local government unit or agency shall make for such provision by ordinance or resolution



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# Record Retention Considerations

- Emails and social media
- Cell phones
  - Data, texts, other messages, photographs
- Storage, archiving, searching
  - Costs, equipment, maintenance



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# Further Information

- Consult legal counsel
- Download DOJ Compliance Guides and other resources at <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/office-open-government/office-open-government>
- Call the Office of Open Government: (608) 267-2220
- Write to:      Office of Open Government  
                    Department of Justice  
                    P.O. Box 7857  
                    Madison, WI 53707-7857



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