

# Bill Lueders: Opees honor good acts and bad

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As part of [Sunshine Week](#), an annual celebration of open government that runs from March 10-16, the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council is bestowing its 13th annual Openness Awards, or Opees.

This year's honorees reflect the range of people fighting for transparency in Wisconsin, from a citizens group to a Wisconsin state senator, from the state's largest paper to a local publication produced by teens. We are also acknowledging both sides in a brouhaha in the city of Racine, where officials tried to block access to rudimentary public records.

The awards will be handed out at the ninth annual [Wisconsin Watchdog Awards Dinner](#) in Madison on Tuesday, April 16, at the Madison Club. The event, open to the public, is presented by the Council, the [Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism](#) and the [Madison Pro Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists](#).

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And the winners are:

**Political Openness Award ("Popee"): Chris Larson.** Members of the state Legislature, alone among state and local government officials, are able to legally [destroy](#) records they wish to hide, as some are now doing. Larson, a state senator from Milwaukee, has introduced [legislation](#) to end this abusive practice, which he has [called](#) "an invitation to corruption."

**Citizen Openness Award ("Copee"): Citizens for a Clean Wausau.** This local

environmental group, especially co-founder Tom Kilian, spent countless hours [looking into](#) soil contamination at the site of a former Wausau wood-waste plant, unearthing piles of records. As a result, the state Department of Natural Resources [opened](#) an investigation and asked the manufacturer's parent company to submit a cleanup plan.

**Media Openness Award (“Mopee”): Simpson Street Free Press.** A Madison-based newspaper produced mainly by high school students, the Free Press [pushed back hard](#) against the claims made by a group affiliated with the Madison School District that the group is not subject to the state's open records and open meetings laws. This prompted one school board member to [call](#) for requiring any group that includes school district representatives to follow those laws.

**Open Records Scoop of the Year (“Scoop”): “Lessons Lost,” Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.** This multifaceted report examined the challenges presented by the surprisingly high number of students who transfer between schools. Reporter Erin Richards, data analyst Kevin Crowe and others used public records to produce an incisive and disturbing portrait of this largely unexplored problem.

**Whistleblower of the Year (“Whoopee”): Sandra Weidner.** This Racine alderperson sued over her city's efforts to shield some of her own email exchanges with constituents, and was [cited](#) for contempt of court for disclosing information about her case, which a Racine County judge conducted in secret. After media groups intervened, virtually all of the case records were [released](#). But, if not for Weidner, no one would have even known it happened at all.

**No Friend of Openness (“Nopee”): The City of Racine.** City Attorney Scott Letteney and Mayor Cory Mason [wasted](#) more than \$75,000 of taxpayers' money fighting to prevent the public from seeing run-of-the-mill emails and other records. Letteney's office even [claimed](#) it could not release records showing how much it was paying outside counsel for this foolish fight. The city trampled its citizens' right to public information—and then made them foot the bill for it. Ouch.

*– Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the [Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council](#) ([wisfoic.org](#)), a group dedicated to open government. Bill Lueders, editor of *The Progressive*, is the Council's president.*

