

Evers says he wasn't aware call with GOP leaders on COVID-19 rules was being recorded

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Gov. Tony Evers' wasn't aware a May phone call he and his aides had with the Legislature's top two Republicans was being recorded and has directed staff "that this will not happen again," a spokeswoman says.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, said they were outraged to learn the May 14 call with Evers, Chief of Staff Maggie Gau and Chief Legal Counsel Ryan Nilsestuen had been recorded.

Fitzgerald called it "Nixonesque," while Vos said it was "shameful."

"In 26 years in the Legislature, this is one of the most brazen examples of unethical, unprofessional conduct I have ever seen," Fitzgerald said.

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Evers spokeswoman Melissa Baldauff said the recording was intended for internal use only to help with "detailed note taking" as the gov, his staff and the GOP leaders discussed the next steps after the state Supreme Court overturned the administration's extended stay-at-home order. It was only released following an open records request for the tape.

"The goal was for both sides to come to the table with ideas on what should be included in a rule that would be amenable to Republicans in the Legislature, and our staff wanted to ensure that any rule we drafted would accurately reflect this conversation," Baldauff said.

Baldauff didn't respond to questions late yesterday on who authorized taping the

May 14 phone call or whether anyone had been disciplined for doing so.

The call, to discuss the next steps after the state Supreme Court ruling, was contentious at times, according to audio released by Evers' office.

During one exchange, Vos tried to pin down the Evers about what a possible rule might look like, while Evers was trying to get the leaders to say what they'd support.

As the gov's aides talked about the Badger Bounce Back plan that the administration had unveiled to move from one phase to the next under his stay-at-home order, Fitzgerald insisted that was "all behind us" because the court ruling.

Evers later said he would've preferred a phased opening of bars with some parameters rather than seeing pictures of them "bursting at the seams" shortly after the court ruling.

Fitzgerald then interrupted him.

"Governor, when was the last time you were in Home Depot on a Saturday? When was the last time you were in a Walmart on a Saturday? Are you kidding me? You're not being serious right now, are you?" Fitzgerald said. "Those places are bursting at the seams every weekend. C'mon."

Evers said he'd driven by the stores and seen long lines, but noted that meant they weren't letting people in.

Fitzgerald countered the Costco in Sun Prairie "is out of control" every weekend.

"I know what you're saying, but I don't buy it," Fitzgerald said, adding he wasn't trying to be argumentative.

Fitzgerald said any rule should be focused on looming issues such as when the Milwaukee Brewers would return to action this summer, how to deal with college kids returning to campus in August and guidelines for K-12 schools.

Evers asked Fitzgerald what the state should do if there were a catastrophic increase in COVID-19 cases.

"Do we just say the hell with it?" Evers asked.

“No, somebody should call Barry Alvarez and say is there going to be football in Camp Randall in August,” Fitzgerald responded, referring to the University of Wisconsin athletic director.

Later, Vos urged both sides to ramp down the rhetoric surrounding the court’s ruling and how people were responding.

“I don’t necessarily know how that benefits ultimately coming to a consensus or having a plan that more of the state of Wisconsin can rally around, so I’m going to try to keep doing that,” Vos said, asking others to do the same so the leaders could get their caucuses to rally around a plan.

Listen to the call: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#)

See notes on the call from the gov’s office [here](#).