

Wisconsin Transparency Project: Open meetings complaint filed against Village of Belleville

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A year ago, the Village of Belleville had its 6,300 square foot former library appraised at \$210,000. This month, they sold it to a developer for a mere \$20,000. That deal was worked out and agreed to in a series of closed meetings starting in May. Today, Josh Russow, a concerned local citizen, filed an Open Meetings Law complaint against the Village, asking the Dane County District Attorney, to charge the Village Board's members with 10 separate violations for those illegal closed sessions.

"While the Open Meetings Law has some exemptions allowing governmental bodies to go into closed sessions to discuss their bargaining strategy and protect their negotiating position, that exemption does not allow the entire course of negotiation to occur behind closed doors," explained Tom Kamenick, President and Founder of the Wisconsin Transparency Project, which filed the complaint. "It's one of the most commonly abused exemptions, as government officials often believe they can meet in secret any time a potential deal is on the table."

Local resident Jeff Larson, who was at the July 11 meeting where the deal was approved, had this to say: "If the board believes this is such a great deal for the village and its residents, why did it work so hard to hide information and prevent the public from sharing any input until after the decision was already made? There are plenty of other buyers who would be willing to pay more with terms more favorable to the village, but the board prevented that from happening. Selling this property so far below market value is not in our best interest."

If charges are brought, the Village Board members face fines of up to \$300 for each

violation. If the District Attorney declines to bring charges, the complainant may bring a prosecution himself, which would could make the Village liable for his attorney fees on top of the individual fines.