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Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council names ‘Opee’ winners

A citizen concerned about plans to develop a city park, an alderperson who felt his colleagues broke the law and a district attorney who filed charges against a town for open records violations are among the winners in this year’s Openness Awards, or Opees, bestowed by the [Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council](#).

The awards, announced today in advance of national [Sunshine Week](#) (sunshineweek.org), March 13-19, recognize outstanding efforts to protect the state’s tradition of open government — and highlight some threats to it.

This is the 16th consecutive year that Opees have been awarded. They will be presented at the Wisconsin Watchdog Awards reception and dinner, on Thursday, April 21, at the Madison Club in Madison, beginning at 5 p.m. (For details, see [wisconsinwatch.org](#).)

“Like all areas of civic life, the pursuit of transparency in government has heroes and villains, both of whom deserve recognition,” said Bill Lueders, council president. “Our openness laws are only as strong as our willingness to defend them.”

The Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council, a nonpartisan group that seeks to promote open government, consists of about two dozen members representing media and other public interests. Sponsoring organizations include the Wisconsin Newspaper Association, Wisconsin Broadcasters Association and the Madison Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

Awards are being given this year in six categories. The winners are:

Citizen Openness Award (“Copee”): Christine Brennan

When a proposed Fond du Lac park redevelopment didn’t pass the smell test, this citizen asked to see the [records of communications](#) between public officials and project backers. When the city asked her for \$6,888 on top of the \$1,000 she had already paid to locate these records, she balked. Her experience [helped raise](#) public awareness of abusive location fee costs and led to [better methods](#) for archiving records in Fond du Lac. And the released records spurred a [backlash](#) against the project and the [city council members](#) who supported it.

Political Openness Award (“Popee”): Winnebago County District Attorney’s Office

While state district attorneys have statutory authority to bring open records and open meeting enforcement actions, they seldom do. But Eric Sparr, the deputy district attorney of Winnebago County, and his boss, District Attorney Christian Gossett, cut against the grain when they charged Town of Omro officials on eight counts for open records violations. A hearing on the charges is set for March 11.

Honorable mention: Tony Evers

Wisconsin’s governor this year [vetoed](#) a bill that unanimously passed both houses of the Legislature to create a new legislative human resources office with built-in secrecy provisions. He also [proposed](#) in his budget to raise the threshold for when records custodians can tack on location costs from \$50 to \$100.

Media Openness Award (“Mopee”): Isiah Holmes, *Wisconsin Examiner*

Holmes and this online news outlet have made prodigious use of the state’s open records law to unearth often shocking information on Wauwatsa’s police department, which [deemed](#) Wauwatosa Mayor Dennis McBride a “target” and [maintained](#) a watchlist of protesters and that [Holmes himself](#) was on for covering the protests as a journalist. Exposing such abuses serves the highest purpose of our open records law.

Open Records Scoop of the Year (“Scoop”): The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Wisconsin’s largest daily paper and reporters including John Diedrich, Raquel Rutledge and Daphne Chen used city inspection reports and other records to produce a series of stories that exposed how dangerous electrical wiring has for years been causing fires and claiming victims in Milwaukee rental units. The series, “[Wires and Fires](#),” spurred city officials to seek ways to prevent these fires from occurring.

Whistleblower of the Year: Douglas Oitzinger

This alderperson in the city of Marinette stood up to his fellow city council members in favor of transparency when he [filed suit](#) in December alleging that they had improperly gone into closed session to discuss water supply options. “This is about open government,” he told the local paper. “That’s all it’s about.”

No Friend of Openness (“Nopee”): Michael Gableman and Robin Vos

What exactly is Gableman, a former state Supreme Court justice, doing for the [\\$676,000 in taxpayer funds](#) that Vos, the speaker of the state Assembly, agreed to pay him? Neither Gableman nor Vos seem to want people to know, despite a judge’s [finding](#) that their “denials, delays, and refusals” violate the records law. In fact, so few records have been provided in response to records requests that there is [speculation](#) that records are being destroyed. So is the state’s tradition of open government.