

May 2024

# Wisconsin Open Meetings Law Compliance Guide



Wisconsin Department of Justice  
Attorney General Josh Kaul

# Message from the Office of Open Government

It is imperative that we recognize that transparency is the cornerstone of democracy and that citizens cannot hold elected officials accountable in a representative government unless government is performed in the open.

The Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) plays an important role in ensuring Wisconsin's open government laws are properly and faithfully executed by public officials. Wisconsin DOJ's Office of Open Government makes available a snapshot of all public records requests pending each week, average monthly response times for the office, and responses to public records requests that may be of public interest on the Wisconsin DOJ website. Wisconsin DOJ responds to hundreds of inquiries every year concerning issues related to the open meetings law and the public records law, and instructs on open government at conferences, seminars, and training sessions. In these ways, the Office of Open Government provides resources and services to all state, regional, and local government entities and citizens.

Wisconsin's open government laws promote democracy by ensuring that all state, regional and local governments conduct their business with transparency. Wisconsin citizens have a right to know how their government is spending their tax dollars and exercising the powers granted by the people. This guide is a resource for everyone to understand and exercise their right to access their government.

This compliance guide may be accessed, downloaded, or printed free of charge from the Wisconsin DOJ website, by visiting <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/>. Please share this guide with your constituencies and colleagues.

Records custodians and all those who perform public duties are encouraged to contact the Office of Open Government if we can be of assistance.

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# Disclaimer

This guide provides an overview of the law and compiles information provided by Wisconsin DOJ in response to inquiries submitted over the course of several decades. This guide is provided pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 19.98 and does not constitute an informal or formal opinion of the Attorney General pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 165.015(1).

This guide does not provide answers to every question that may arise regarding the open meetings law. Although this guide is updated periodically, it reflects the current law as of the date of its publication, and it may be superseded or affected by newer versions and/or changes in the law. This guide does not create an attorney-client relationship. You should consult with an attorney for specific information and advice when necessary and appropriate.

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# POLICY OF THE OPEN MEETINGS LAW

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The State of Wisconsin recognizes the importance of having a public informed about governmental affairs. The state's open meetings law declares that:

In recognition of the fact that a representative government of the American type is dependent upon an informed electorate, it is declared to be the policy of this state that the public is entitled to the fullest and most complete information regarding the affairs of government as is compatible with the conduct of governmental business.<sup>1</sup>

In order to advance this policy, the open meetings law requires that “all meetings of all state and local governmental bodies shall be publicly held in places reasonably accessible to members of the public and shall be open to all citizens at all times unless otherwise expressly provided by law.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, there is a presumption that meetings of governmental bodies must be held in open session.<sup>3</sup> Although there are exemptions allowing closed sessions in specified circumstances, they are to be invoked sparingly and only where necessary to protect the public interest. The policy of the open meetings law dictates that governmental bodies convene in closed session only where holding an open session would be incompatible with the conduct of governmental affairs. “Mere government inconvenience is . . . no bar to the requirements of the law.”<sup>4</sup>

The open meetings law explicitly provides that all of its provisions must be liberally construed to achieve its purposes.<sup>5</sup> This rule of liberal construction applies in all situations, except enforcement actions in which forfeitures are sought.<sup>6</sup> Public officials must be ever mindful of the policy of openness and the rule of liberal construction in order to ensure compliance with both the letter and spirit of the law.<sup>7</sup>

## WHEN DOES THE OPEN MEETINGS LAW APPLY?

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The open meetings law applies to every “meeting” of a “governmental body.”<sup>8</sup> The terms “meeting” and “governmental body” are defined in Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1) and (2).

### Definition of “Governmental Body”

A “governmental body” is defined as:

[A] state or local agency, board, commission, council, department or public body corporate and politic created by constitution, statute, ordinance, rule or order; a governmental or quasi-governmental corporation except for the Bradley Center sports and entertainment corporation; a local exposition district under subch. II of ch. 229; a long-term care district under s. 46.2895; or a formally constituted subunit of any of the foregoing, but excludes any such

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<sup>1</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.81(1).

<sup>2</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.81(2).

<sup>3</sup> *State ex rel. Newspapers, Inc. v. Showers*, 135 Wis. 2d 77, 97, 398 N.W.2d 154 (1987).

<sup>4</sup> *State ex rel. Lynch v. Conta*, 71 Wis. 2d 662, 678, 239 N.W.2d 313 (1976).

<sup>5</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.81(4); *State ex rel. Badke v. Vill. Bd. of Greendale*, 173 Wis. 2d 553, 570, 494 N.W.2d 408 (1993); *State ex rel. Lawton v. Town of Barton*, 2005 WI App 16, ¶ 19, 278 Wis. 2d 388, 692 N.W.2d 304 (“The legislature has issued a clear mandate that we are to vigorously and liberally enforce the policy behind the open meetings law.”).

<sup>6</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.81(4).

<sup>7</sup> *State ex rel. Citizens for Responsible Dev. v. City of Milton*, 2007 WI App 114, ¶ 6, 300 Wis. 2d 649, 731 N.W.2d 640 (“The legislature has made the policy choice that, despite the efficiency advantages of secret government, a transparent process is favored.”).

<sup>8</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.83.

body or committee or subunit of such body which is formed for or meeting for the purpose of collective bargaining under subch. I, IV, V, or VI of ch. 111.<sup>9</sup>

This definition includes multiple parts, the most important of which are discussed below.

- **State or Local Agencies, Boards, and Commissions**

The definition of “governmental body” includes a “state or local agency, board, commission, committee, council, department or public body corporate and politic created by constitution, statute, ordinance, rule or order . . . .”<sup>10</sup> This list of entities is broad enough to include virtually any collective governmental entity, regardless of what it is labeled. It is important to note that these entities are defined primarily in terms of the manner in which they are created, rather than in terms of the type of authority they possess. Purely advisory bodies are therefore subject to the law, even though they do not possess final decision-making power, as long as they are created by constitution, statute, ordinance, rule, or order.<sup>11</sup>

The words “constitution,” “statute,” and “ordinance,” as used in the definition of “governmental body,” refer to the constitution and statutes of the State of Wisconsin and to ordinances promulgated by a political subdivision of the state. Thus, the definition includes state and local bodies created by Wisconsin’s constitution or statutes, including condemnation commissions created by Wis. Stat. § 32.08, as well as local bodies created by an ordinance of any Wisconsin municipality. It does not, however, include bodies created solely by federal law or by the law of some other sovereign.

State and local bodies created by “rule or order” are also included in the definition. The term “rule or order” has been liberally construed to include any directive, formal or informal, creating a body and assigning it duties.<sup>12</sup> This includes directives from governmental bodies, presiding officers of governmental bodies, or certain governmental officials, such as county executives, mayors, or heads of a state or local agency, department, or division.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, for example, in *State ex rel. Krueger v. Appleton Area School District Board of Education*, the Wisconsin Supreme Court held that a curriculum committee, “created by” school board rule and given the delegated authority to review and select educational materials for the school board’s approval, was subject to open meetings laws.<sup>14</sup>

- First, the curriculum committee was a “committee” under Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1), not an ad hoc gathering, because it was comprised of a defined membership of individuals selected pursuant to the procedures set forth in the school board’s policy handbook, and its members were empowered to vote on how the school board should exercise its collective authority as a body.<sup>15</sup>
- Second, the curriculum committee was “created by . . . rule” under Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1), because the school board handbook policy was authorized by school board rule, thereby authorizing and enabling the committee to be created. The school board rule also prescribed the procedures

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<sup>9</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1).

<sup>10</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1).

<sup>11</sup> See *State v. Swanson*, 92 Wis. 2d 310, 317, 284 N.W.2d 655 (1979).

<sup>12</sup> 78 Op. Att’y Gen. 67, 68–69 (1989).

<sup>13</sup> See 78 Op. Att’y Gen. 67.

<sup>14</sup> *State ex rel. Krueger v. Appleton Area Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ.*, 2017 WI 70, ¶¶ 27–34, 376 Wis. 2d 239, 898 N.W.2d 35.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* ¶¶ 28–31.



for school district employees to follow in reviewing educational materials and presenting them to the school board for approval. Read together, the school board rule and the board-approved handbook policy therefore authorized committees like the one at issue to be created, and also authorized such committees to exercise the school board's delegated authority over curriculum review for the school district.<sup>16</sup>

- In so holding, the Wisconsin Supreme Court explained that it did not matter that two individual district employees decided to put the rule and handbook policy in motion to form the committee. It also did not matter that neither the school board rule nor the handbook policy had provisions that created or mentioned the committee by name. Nor did it matter that the committee deviated from the handbook's procedures in making its recommendations to the school board for a specific course's curriculum. Rather, the dispositive factor was that the school board's handbook policy authorized such review committees to be created for the purposes of reviewing curriculum materials and making recommendations to the school board for adoption.<sup>17</sup>

A group organized by its own members pursuant to its own charter, however, is not created by any governmental directive and thus is not a governmental body, even if it is subject to governmental regulation and receives public funding and support. Thus, the relationship of affiliation between the University of Wisconsin Union and various student clubs is not sufficient to make the governing board of such a club a governmental body.<sup>18</sup>

The Wisconsin Supreme Court or Wisconsin Attorney General have concluded that the following entities are state or local bodies that are subject to the open meetings law by virtue of having been created by constitution, statute, ordinance, resolution, rule or order:

- **State or Local Bodies Created by Constitution, Statute, or Ordinance**
  - ◇ A municipal public utility managing a city-owned public electrical utility.<sup>19</sup>
  - ◇ Departments of formally constituted subunits of the University of Wisconsin system or campus.<sup>20</sup>
  - ◇ A town board, but not an annual or special town meeting of town electors.<sup>21</sup>
  - ◇ A county board of zoning adjustment authorized by Wis. Stat. § 59.99(3) (1983) (now Wis. Stat. § 59.694(1)).<sup>22</sup>
  - ◇ A public inland lake protection and rehabilitation district established by a county or municipality, pursuant to Wis. Stat. §§ 33.21 to 33.27.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Krueger*, 2017 WI 70, ¶¶ 32–34, 43.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* ¶¶ 35–40.

<sup>18</sup> *Penkalski Correspondence* (May 4, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> 65 Op. Att'y Gen. 243 (1976).

<sup>20</sup> 66 Op. Att'y Gen. 60 (1977).

<sup>21</sup> 66 Op. Att'y Gen. 237 (1977).

<sup>22</sup> *Gaylord Correspondence* (June 11, 1984).

<sup>23</sup> *DuVall Correspondence* (Nov. 6, 1986).

▪ **State or Local Bodies Created by Resolution, Rule, or Order**

- ◇ A committee created by a school board's policy handbook to review and select education materials for the board's approval.<sup>24</sup>
- ◇ A committee appointed by the school superintendent to consider school library materials.<sup>25</sup>
- ◇ A citizen's advisory group appointed by the mayor.<sup>26</sup>
- ◇ An advisory committee appointed by the Natural Resources Board, the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, or a District Director, Bureau Director, or Property Manager of that department.<sup>27</sup>
- ◇ A consortium of school districts created by a contract between districts; a resolution is the equivalent of an order.<sup>28</sup>
- ◇ An industrial agency created by resolution of a county board under Wis. Stat. § 59.57(2).<sup>29</sup>
- ◇ A deed restriction committee created by resolution of a common council.<sup>30</sup>
- ◇ A school district's strategic-planning team whose creation was authorized and whose duties were assigned to it by the school board.<sup>31</sup>
- ◇ A citizen's advisory committee appointed by a county executive.<sup>32</sup>
- ◇ An already-existing numerically definable group of employees of a governmental entity, assigned by the entity's chief administrative officer to prepare recommendations for the entity's policy-making board, when the group's meetings include the subject of the chief administrative officer's directive.<sup>33</sup>
- ◇ A Criminal Justice Study Commission created by the Wisconsin Department of Justice, the University of Wisconsin Law School, the State Bar of Wisconsin, and the Marquette University Law School.<sup>34</sup>
- ◇ Grant review panels created by a consortium which was established pursuant to an order of the Wisconsin Commissioner of Insurance.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Krueger*, 2017 WI 70, ¶ 27.

<sup>25</sup> *Staples Correspondence* (Feb. 10, 1981).

<sup>26</sup> *Funkhouser Correspondence* (Mar. 17, 1983).

<sup>27</sup> 78 Op. Att'y Gen. 67.

<sup>28</sup> I-10-93 (Oct. 15, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> I-22-90 (Apr. 4, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> I-34-90 (May 25, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> I-29-91 (Oct. 17, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> *Jacques Correspondence* (Jan. 26, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> *Tylka Correspondence* (June 8, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> *Lichstein Correspondence* (Sept. 20, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> *Katayama Correspondence* (Jan. 20, 2006).

- ◇ A joint advisory task force established by a resolution of a Wisconsin town board and a resolution of the legislature of a sovereign Indian tribe.<sup>36</sup>
- ◇ A University of Wisconsin student government committee, council, representative assembly, or similar collective body that has been created and assigned governmental responsibilities pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 36.09(5).<sup>37</sup>

- **Governmental or Quasi-Governmental Corporations**

The definition of “governmental body” also includes a “governmental or quasi-governmental corporation,” except for the Bradley sports center corporation.<sup>38</sup> The term “governmental corporation” is not defined in either the statutes or the case law interpreting the statutes. It is clear, however, that a “governmental corporation” must at least include a corporation established for some public purpose and created directly by the state legislature or by some other governmental body pursuant to specific statutory authorization or direction.<sup>39</sup>

The term “quasi-governmental corporation” also is not defined in the statutes, but its definition was discussed by the Wisconsin Supreme Court in *State v. Beaver Dam Area Development Corp.* (“BDADC”).<sup>40</sup> In that decision, the court held that a “quasi-governmental corporation” does not have to be *created* by the government or be *per se* governmental, but rather is a corporation that significantly resembles a governmental corporation in function, effect, or status.<sup>41</sup> The court further held that each case must be decided on its own particular facts, under the totality of the circumstances and set forth a non-exhaustive list of factors to be examined in determining whether a particular corporation sufficiently resembles a governmental corporation to be deemed quasi-governmental, while emphasizing that no single factor is outcome determinative.<sup>42</sup> The factors set out by the court in *BDADC* fall into five basic categories: (1) the extent to which the private corporation is supported by public funds; (2) whether the private corporation serves a public function and, if so, whether it also has other private functions; (3) whether the private corporation appears in its public presentations to be a governmental entity; (4) the extent to which the private corporation is subject to governmental control; and (5) the degree of access that government bodies have to the private corporation’s records.<sup>43</sup>

In adopting this case-specific, multi-factored “function, effect or status” standard, the Wisconsin Supreme Court followed a 1991 Attorney General opinion.<sup>44</sup> Prior to 1991, however, Attorney General opinions on this subject emphasized some of the more formal aspects of

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<sup>36</sup> I-04-09 (Sept. 28, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> I-05-09 (Dec. 17, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1).

<sup>39</sup> See 66 Op. Att’y Gen. 113, 115 (1977).

<sup>40</sup> *State v. Beaver Dam Area Dev. Corp.* (“BDADC”), 2008 WI 90, 312 Wis. 2d 84, 752 N.W.2d 295.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* ¶¶ 33–36.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* ¶¶ 7–8, 63 n.14, 79.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* ¶ 62.

<sup>44</sup> See 80 Op. Att’y Gen. 129, 135 (1991) (Milwaukee Economic Development Corporation, a Wis. Stat. ch. 181 corporation organized by two private citizens and one city employee, is a quasi-governmental corporation); see also *Kowalczyk Correspondence* (Mar. 13, 2006) (non-stock, non-profit corporations established for the purpose of providing emergency medical or fire department services for participating municipalities are quasi-governmental corporations).

quasi-governmental corporations. Those opinions should now be read in light of the *BDADC* decision.<sup>45</sup>

In March 2009, the Attorney General issued an informal opinion which analyzed the *BDADC* decision in greater detail and expressed the view that, out of the numerous factors discussed in that decision, particular weight should be given to whether a corporation serves a public function and has any private functions.<sup>46</sup> When a private corporation contracts to perform certain services for a governmental body, the key considerations in determining whether the corporation becomes quasi-governmental are whether the corporation is performing a portion of the governmental body's public functions or whether the services provided by the corporation play an integral part in any stage—including the purely deliberative stage—of the governmental body's decision-making process.<sup>47</sup>

In January 2019, the Wisconsin Court of Appeals also analyzed the *BDADC* decision further, and held that, while all the non-exhaustive factors set forth in *BDADC* are relevant and no one factor is outcome determinative, a "primary consideration" is whether the private corporation is funded exclusively on public tax dollars or interest generated on those dollars.<sup>48</sup>

- **State Legislature**

Generally speaking, the open meetings law applies to the state legislature, including the senate, assembly, and any committees or subunits of those bodies.<sup>49</sup> The law does not apply to any partisan caucus of the senate or assembly.<sup>50</sup> The open meetings law also does not apply where it conflicts with a rule of the legislature, senate, or assembly.<sup>51</sup> Additional restrictions are set forth in Wis. Stat. § 19.87.

- **Subunits**

A "formally constituted subunit" of a governmental body is itself a "governmental body" within the definition in Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1). A subunit is a separate, smaller body created by a parent body and composed exclusively of members of the parent body.<sup>52</sup> If, for example, a fifteen member county board appoints a committee consisting of five members of the county board, that committee would be considered a "subunit" subject to the open meetings law. This is true despite the fact that the five-person committee would be smaller than a quorum of the county board. Even a committee with only two members is considered a "subunit," as is a committee that is only advisory and that has no power to make binding decisions.<sup>53</sup>

Groups that include both members and non-members of a parent body are not "subunits" of the parent body. Such groups nonetheless frequently fit within the definition of a "governmental

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<sup>45</sup> See [66 Op. Att'y Gen. 113](#) (volunteer fire department organized under Wis. Stat. ch. 181 is not a quasi-governmental corporation); [73 Op. Att'y Gen. 53](#) (1984) (Historic Sites Foundation organized under Wis. Stat. ch. 181 is not a quasi-governmental corporation); [74 Op. Att'y Gen. 38](#) (corporation established to provide financial support to public broadcasting stations organized under Wis. Stat. ch. 181 is not a quasi-governmental corporation); [Geyer Correspondence](#) (Feb. 26, 1987) (Grant County Economic Development Corporation organized by private individuals under Wis. Stat. ch. 181 is not a quasi-governmental corporation, even though it serves a public purpose and receives more than fifty percent of its funding from public sources).

<sup>46</sup> [I-02-09](#) (Mar. 19, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*

<sup>48</sup> *State ex rel. Flynn v. Kemper Ctr., Inc.*, 2019 WI App 6, ¶¶ 14–16, 385 Wis. 2d 811, 924 N.W.2d 218.

<sup>49</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.87.

<sup>50</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.87(3).

<sup>51</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.87(2).

<sup>52</sup> [74 Op. Att'y Gen. 38](#), 40 (1985).

<sup>53</sup> [Dziki Correspondence](#) (Dec. 12, 2006).

body” —*e.g.*, as advisory groups to the governmental bodies or government officials that created them.

Any entity that fits within the definition of “governmental body” must comply with the requirements of the open meetings law. In most cases, it is readily apparent whether a particular entity fits within the definition. On occasion, there is some doubt. In such situations, the entity should consult with its legal counsel. Any doubts as to the applicability of the open meetings law should be resolved in favor of complying with the law’s requirements.

- **Entities That Are Not Governmental Bodies**

- **Governmental Offices Held by a Single Individual**

The open meetings law does not apply to a governmental department with only a single member.<sup>54</sup> Because the term “body” connotes a group of individuals, a governmental office held by a single individual likewise is not a “governmental body” within the meaning of the open meetings law. Thus, the open meetings law does not apply to the office of coroner or to inquests conducted by the coroner.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the Attorney General has concluded that the open meetings law does not apply to an administrative hearing conducted by an individual hearing examiner.<sup>56</sup>

- **Bodies Meeting for Collective Bargaining**

The definition of “governmental body” explicitly excludes bodies that are formed for or meeting for the purpose of collective bargaining with municipal or state employees under subchapters I, IV, or V of Wis. Stat. ch. 111. A body formed exclusively for the purpose of collective bargaining is not subject to the open meetings law.<sup>57</sup> A body formed for other purposes, in addition to collective bargaining, is not subject to the open meetings law when conducting collective bargaining.<sup>58</sup> The Attorney General has, however, advised multi-purpose bodies to comply with the open meetings law, including the requirements for convening in closed session, when meeting for the purpose of forming negotiating strategies to be used in collective bargaining.<sup>59</sup> The collective bargaining exclusion does not permit any body to consider the final ratification or approval of a collective bargaining agreement under subchapters I, IV, or V of Wis. Stat. ch. 111 in closed session.<sup>60</sup>

- **Bodies Created by the Wisconsin Supreme Court**

The Wisconsin Supreme Court has held that bodies created by the court, pursuant to its superintending control over the administration of justice, are not governed by the open meetings law.<sup>61</sup> Thus, generally speaking, the open meetings law does not apply to the court or bodies created by the court. In the *Lynch* case, for example, the court held that the former open meetings law, Wis. Stat. § 66.77(1) (1973), did not apply to the Wisconsin Judicial Commission, which is responsible for handling misconduct complaints against judges. Similarly, the Attorney General has indicated that the open meetings law does not apply to: the Board of Attorneys Professional

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<sup>54</sup> *Plourde v. Habegger*, 2006 WI App 147, 294 Wis. 2d 746, 720 N.W.2d 130.

<sup>55</sup> 67 Op. Att’y Gen. 250 (1978).

<sup>56</sup> *Clifford Correspondence* (Dec. 2, 1980).

<sup>57</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1).

<sup>58</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1)

<sup>59</sup> 66 Op. Att’y Gen. 93, 96-97 (1977).

<sup>60</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(3).

<sup>61</sup> *State ex rel. Lynch v. Dancey*, 71 Wis. 2d 287, 238 N.W.2d 81 (1976).

Responsibility;<sup>62</sup> the Board of Bar Examiners;<sup>63</sup> or the monthly judicial administration meetings of circuit court judges, conducted under the authority of the court's superintending power over the judiciary.<sup>64</sup>

- **Ad Hoc Gatherings**

Although the definition of a governmental body is broad, some gatherings are too loosely constituted to fit the definition. Thus, *Conta* holds that the directive that creates the body must also “confer[] collective power and define[] when it exists.”<sup>65</sup> *Showers* adds the further requirement that a “meeting” of a governmental body takes place only if there are a sufficient number of members present to determine the governmental body's course of action.<sup>66</sup> In order to determine whether a sufficient number of members are present to determine a governmental body's course of action, the membership of the body must be numerically definable. The Attorney General's Office thus has concluded that a loosely constituted group of citizens and local officials instituted by the mayor to discuss various issues related to a dam closure was not a governmental body, because no rule or order defined the group's membership, and no provision existed for the group to exercise collective power.<sup>67</sup>

The definition of a “governmental body” is only rarely satisfied when groups of a governmental unit's employees gather on a subject within the unit's jurisdiction. Thus, for example, the Attorney General concluded that the predecessor of the current open meetings law did not apply when a department head met with some or even all of his or her staff.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, the Attorney General's Office has advised that the courts would be unlikely to conclude that meetings between the administrators of a governmental agency and the agency's employees, or between governmental employees and representatives of a governmental contractor were “governmental bodies” subject to the open meetings law.<sup>69</sup> However, where an already-existing numerically definable group of employees of a governmental entity are assigned by the entity's chief administrative officer to prepare recommendations for the entity's policy-making board, the group's meetings with respect to the subject of the directive are subject to the open meetings law.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> [OAG 67-79](#) (July 31, 1979) (unpublished) (the Board of Attorneys Professional Responsibility was the predecessor to the Office of Lawyer Regulation).

<sup>63</sup> [Kosobucki Correspondence](#) (Sept. 6, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> [Constantine Correspondence](#) (Feb. 28, 2000).

<sup>65</sup> *Conta*, 71 Wis. 2d at 681.

<sup>66</sup> *Showers*, 135 Wis. 2d at 102.

<sup>67</sup> [Godlewski Correspondence](#) (Sept. 24, 1998).

<sup>68</sup> 57 Op. Att'y Gen. 213, 216 (1968).

<sup>69</sup> [Peplnjak Correspondence](#) (June 8, 1998).

<sup>70</sup> [Tylka Correspondence](#) (June 8, 2005).

## Definition of “Meeting”

A “meeting” is defined as:

[T]he convening of members of a governmental body for the purpose of exercising the responsibilities, authority, power or duties delegated to or vested in the body. If one-half or more of the members of a governmental body are present, the meeting is rebuttably presumed to be for the purpose of exercising the responsibilities, authority, power or duties delegated to or vested in the body. The term does not include any social or chance gathering or conference which is not intended to avoid this subchapter . . . .<sup>71</sup>

The statute then excepts the following: an inspection of a public works project or highway by a town board; or inspection of a public works project by a town sanitary district; or the supervision, observation, or collection of information about any drain or structure related to a drain by any drainage board.<sup>72</sup>

- **The Showers Test**

The Wisconsin Supreme Court has held that the above statutory definition of a “meeting” applies whenever a convening of members of a governmental body satisfies two requirements: (1) there is a purpose to engage in governmental business and (2) the number of members present is sufficient to determine the governmental body’s course of action.<sup>73</sup>

- **The Purpose Requirement**

The first part of the *Showers* test focuses on the purpose for which the members of the governmental body are gathered. They must be gathered to conduct governmental business. *Showers* stressed that “governmental business” refers to any formal or informal action, including discussion, decision, or information gathering, on matters within the governmental body’s realm of authority.<sup>74</sup> Thus, in *Badke*,<sup>75</sup> the Wisconsin Supreme Court held that the village board conducted a “meeting,” as defined in the open meetings law, when a quorum of the board regularly attended each plan commission meeting to observe the commission’s proceedings on a development plan that was subject to the board’s approval. The court stressed that a governmental body is engaged in governmental business when its members gather to simply hear information on a matter within the body’s realm of authority.<sup>76</sup> The members need not actually discuss the matter or otherwise interact with one another to be engaged in governmental business.<sup>77</sup> The court also held that the gathering of town board members was not chance or social because a majority of town board members attended plan commission meetings with regularity.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, the court of appeals concluded in *Paulton v. Volkmann*,<sup>79</sup> that no meeting occurred where a quorum of school board members attended a gathering of town residents, but did not collect information on a subject the school board had the potential to decide.

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<sup>71</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(2).

<sup>72</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(2).

<sup>73</sup> *Showers*, 135 Wis. 2d at 102.

<sup>74</sup> *Id.* at 102–03.

<sup>75</sup> *Badke*, 173 Wis. 2d at 572–74.

<sup>76</sup> *Id.* at 573–74.

<sup>77</sup> *Id.* at 574–76.

<sup>78</sup> *Id.* at 576.

<sup>79</sup> *Paulton v. Volkmann*, 141 Wis. 2d 370, 375–77, 415 N.W.2d 528 (Ct. App. 1987).

- **The Numbers Requirement**

The second part of the *Showers* test requires that the number of members present be sufficient to determine the governmental body's course of action on the business under consideration. People often assume that this means that the open meetings law applies only to gatherings of a majority of the members of a governmental body. That is not the case because the power to control a body's course of action can refer either to the affirmative power to pass a proposal or the negative power to defeat a proposal. Therefore, a gathering of one-half of the members of a body, or even fewer, may be enough to control a course of action if it is enough to block a proposal. This is called a "negative quorum."

Typically, governmental bodies operate under a simple majority rule in which a margin of one vote is necessary for the body to pass a proposal. Under that approach, exactly one-half of the members of the body constitutes a "negative quorum" because that number against a proposal is enough to prevent the formation of a majority in its favor. Under simple majority rule, therefore, the open meetings law applies whenever one-half or more of the members of the governmental body gather to discuss or act on matters within the body's realm of authority.

The size of a "negative quorum" may be smaller, however, when a governmental body operates under a super majority rule. For example, if a two-thirds majority is required for a body to pass a measure, then any gathering of more than one-third of the body's members would be enough to control the body's course of action by blocking the formation of a two-thirds majority. *Showers* made it clear that the open meetings law applies to such gatherings, as long as the purpose requirement is also satisfied (*i.e.*, the gathering is for the purpose of conducting governmental business).<sup>80</sup> If a three-fourths majority is required to pass a measure, then more than one-fourth of the members would constitute a "negative quorum," etc.

- **Convening of Members**

When the members of a governmental body conduct official business while acting separately, without communicating with each other or engaging in other collective action, there is no meeting within the meaning of the open meetings law.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the phrase "convening of members" in Wis. Stat. § 19.82(2) is not limited to situations in which members of a body are simultaneously gathered in the same location, but may also include other situations in which members are able to effectively communicate with each other and to exercise the authority vested in the body, even if they are not physically present together. Whether such a situation qualifies as a "convening of members" under the open meetings law depends on the extent to which the communications in question resemble a face-to-face exchange.

- **Written Correspondence**

The circulation of a paper or hard copy memorandum among the members of a governmental body, for example, may involve a largely one-way flow of information, with any exchanges spread out over a considerable period of time and little or no conversation-like interaction among members. Accordingly, the Attorney General has long taken the position that such written communications generally do not constitute a "convening of members" for purposes of the open meetings law.<sup>82</sup> Although the rapid evolution of electronic media has made the distinction between

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<sup>80</sup> *Showers*, 135 Wis. 2d at 101-02.

<sup>81</sup> *Katayama Correspondence* (Jan. 20, 2006).

<sup>82</sup> *Merkel Correspondence* (Mar. 11, 1993).



written and oral communication less sharp than it once appeared, it is still unlikely that a Wisconsin court would conclude that the circulation of a document through the postal service, or by other means of paper or hard-copy delivery, could be deemed a “convening” or “gathering” of the members of a governmental body for purposes of the open meetings law.

- **Teleconference and Video Conferences**

Teleconferences or video conferences—including those held through the use of virtual or remote meeting platforms—are very similar to in-person conversations and thus qualify as a convening of members.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, under the *Showers* test, the open meetings law applies to any teleconference or video conference that: (1) is for the purpose of conducting governmental business; and (2) involves a sufficient number of members of the body to determine the body’s course of action on the business under consideration. To comply with the law, a governmental body conducting a meeting by teleconference or video conference must provide the public with an effective means to monitor the conference. This may be accomplished by broadcasting the conference through speakers (and video for video conference) located at one or more sites open to the public or providing the public with an accessible link to attend the meeting remotely.<sup>84</sup> When conducting a video conference, the governmental body should strongly consider providing the public with an alternative telephone dial-in option for observing such a meeting so that lack of internet is not a barrier to monitor the meeting.<sup>85</sup>

- **Electronic Communications**

Written communications transmitted by electronic means, such as email, instant messaging, blogging, or other social media, may also constitute a “convening of members,” depending on how the communication medium is used. Although no Wisconsin court has applied the open meetings law to these methods of electronic communication, it is likely that the courts will try to determine whether the communications in question are more like an in-person discussion—*e.g.*, a rapid back-and-forth exchange of viewpoints among multiple members—or more like non-electronic written correspondence, which generally does not raise open meetings law concerns. If the communications closely resemble an in-person discussion, then they may constitute a meeting if they involve enough members to control an action by the body.<sup>86</sup> In addressing these questions, courts are likely to consider such factors as the following: (1) the number of participants involved in the communications; (2) the number of communications regarding the subject; (3) the time frame within which the electronic communications occurred; and (4) the extent of the conversation-like interactions reflected in the communications.<sup>87</sup>

Because the applicability of the open meetings law to such electronic communications depends on the particular way in which a specific message technology is used, these technologies create special dangers for governmental officials trying to comply with the law. Although two members of a governmental body larger than four members may generally discuss the body’s business without violating the open meetings law, features like “forward” and “reply to all,” common in electronic mail programs, deprive a sender of control over the number and identity of the recipients who eventually may have access to the sender’s message. Moreover, it is quite possible that, through

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<sup>83</sup> 69 Op. Att’y Gen. 143 (1980); [Madsen Correspondence](#) (Jan. 27, 2023).

<sup>84</sup> 69 Op. Att’y Gen. at 145.

<sup>85</sup> Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Additional Information Regarding Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) and Open Meetings](#) (Mar. 20, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> [Krischan Correspondence](#) (Oct. 3, 2000).

<sup>87</sup> [Schmiege Correspondence](#) (Aug. 22, 2018).

the use of electronic mail, a quorum of a governmental body may receive information on a subject within the body's jurisdiction in an almost real-time basis, just as they would receive it in a physical gathering of the members.

Inadvertent violations of the open meetings law through the use of electronic communications can be reduced if electronic mail is used principally to transmit information one-way to a body's membership; if the originator of the message reminds recipients to reply only to the originator, if at all; and if message recipients are scrupulous about minimizing the content and distribution of their replies. Nevertheless, because of the absence of judicial guidance on the subject, and because electronic mail creates the risk that it will be used to carry on private debate and discussion on matters that belong at public meetings subject to public scrutiny, the Attorney General's Office strongly discourages the members of every governmental body from using electronic mail to communicate about issues within the body's realm of authority.<sup>88</sup> Members of a governmental body may not decide matters by email voting, even if the result of the vote is later ratified at a properly noticed meeting.<sup>89</sup>

- **Walking Quorums**

The requirements of the open meetings law also extend to walking quorums. A "walking quorum" is a series of gatherings among separate groups of members of a governmental body, each less than quorum size, who agree, tacitly or explicitly, to act uniformly in sufficient number to reach a quorum.<sup>90</sup> In *Conta*, the court recognized the danger that a walking quorum may produce a predetermined outcome and thus render the publicly-held meeting a mere formality.<sup>91</sup> The court commented that any attempt to avoid the appearance of a "meeting" through use of a walking quorum is subject to prosecution under the open meetings law.<sup>92</sup> Thus, the requirements of the open meetings law cannot be circumvented by using an agent or surrogate to poll a quorum of the members of governmental bodies through a series of individual contacts. Such a circumvention "almost certainly" violates the open meetings law.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, simply keeping track of the votes of less than a negative quorum of the members of a governmental body is "hardly indicative" of a walking quorum.<sup>94</sup>

The essential feature of a "walking quorum" is the element of agreement among members of a body to act uniformly in sufficient numbers to reach a quorum. Where there is no such express or tacit agreement, exchanges among separate groups of members may take place without violating the open meetings law.<sup>95</sup> The signing, by members of a body, of a document asking that a subject be placed on the agenda of an upcoming meeting thus does not constitute a "walking quorum" where the signers have not engaged in substantive discussion or agreed on a uniform course of action regarding the proposed subject.<sup>96</sup> In contrast, where a majority of members of a body sign a document that expressly commits them to a future course of action, a court could find a walking quorum violation.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> [Krischan Correspondence](#) (Oct. 3, 2000); [Benson Correspondence](#) (Mar. 12, 2004).

<sup>89</sup> [I-01-10](#) (Jan. 25, 2010).

<sup>90</sup> [Showers](#), 135 Wis. 2d at 92 (quoting *Conta*, 71 Wis. 2d at 687).

<sup>91</sup> *Conta*, 71 Wis. 2d at 685–88.

<sup>92</sup> *Id.* at 687.

<sup>93</sup> [Clifford Correspondence](#) (Apr. 28, 1986) (individual polling of every member is a prohibited walking quorum); [Herbst Correspondence](#) (July 16, 2008) (individually polling of a quorum of members is a prohibited walking quorum).

<sup>94</sup> *State ex rel. Zecchino v. Dane Cnty. Bd. of Supervisors*, 2018 WI App 19, ¶¶ 11–14, 380 Wis. 2d 453, 909 N.W.2d 203 (individual polling of less than a negative quorum of members is not a prohibited walking quorum).

<sup>95</sup> *Id.* ¶ 10.

<sup>96</sup> [Kay Correspondence](#) (Apr. 25, 2007); [Kittleson Correspondence](#) (June 13, 2007).

<sup>97</sup> [Huff Correspondence](#) (Jan. 15, 2008); see also [I-01-10](#) (Jan. 25, 2010) (use of email voting to decide matters fits the definition of a "walking quorum" violation of the open meetings law).

- **Multiple Meetings**

When a quorum of the members of one governmental body attend a meeting of another governmental body under circumstances where their attendance is not chance or social, in order to gather information or otherwise engage in governmental business regarding a subject over which they have decision-making responsibility, two separate meetings occur, and notice must be given of both meetings.<sup>98</sup> The Attorney General has advised that, despite the “separate public notice” requirement of Wis. Stat. § 19.84(4), a single notice can be used, provided that the notice clearly and plainly indicates that a joint meeting will be held and gives the names of each of the bodies involved, and provided that the notice is published and/or posted in each place where meeting notices are generally published or posted for each governmental body involved.<sup>99</sup>

The kinds of multiple meetings presented in the *Badke* case, and the separate meeting notices required there, must be distinguished from circumstances where a subunit of a parent body meets during a recess from or immediately following the parent body’s meeting, to discuss or act on a matter that was the subject of the parent body’s meeting. In such circumstances, Wis. Stat. § 19.84(6) allows the subunit to meet on that matter without prior public notice.

- **Burden of Proof as to Existence of a Meeting**

The presence of members of a governmental body does not, in itself, establish the existence of a “meeting” subject to the open meetings law. The law provides, however, that if one-half or more of the members of a body are present, the gathering is presumed to be a “meeting.”<sup>100</sup> The law also exempts any “social or chance gathering” not intended to circumvent the requirements of the open meetings law.<sup>101</sup> Thus, where one-half or more of the members of a governmental body rode to a meeting in the same vehicle, the law presumes that the members conducted a “meeting” which was subject to all of the requirements of the open meetings law.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, where a majority of members of a common council gathered at a lounge immediately following a common council meeting, a violation of the open meetings law was presumed.<sup>103</sup> The members of the governmental body may overcome the presumption by proving that they did not discuss any subject that was within the realm of the body’s authority.<sup>104</sup>

Where a person alleges that a gathering of less than one-half the members of a governmental body was held in violation of the open meetings law, that person has the burden of proving that the gathering constituted a “meeting” subject to the law.<sup>105</sup> That burden may be satisfied by proving: (1) that the members gathered to conduct governmental business; and (2) that there was a sufficient number of members present to determine the body’s course of action.

It is important to remember that the overriding policy of the open meetings law is to ensure public access to information about governmental affairs. Under the rule of liberally construing the law to ensure this purpose, any doubts as to whether a particular gathering constitutes a “meeting” subject to the open meetings law should be resolved in favor of complying with the provisions of the law.

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<sup>98</sup> *Badke*, 173 Wis. 2d at 577.

<sup>99</sup> [Friedman Correspondence](#) (Mar. 4, 2003).

<sup>100</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(2).

<sup>101</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(2).

<sup>102</sup> [Karstens Correspondence](#) (July 31, 2008).

<sup>103</sup> [Dieck Correspondence](#) (Sept. 12, 2007).

<sup>104</sup> *Id.*

<sup>105</sup> *Showers*, 135 Wis. 2d at 102.

## WHAT IS REQUIRED IF THE OPEN MEETINGS LAW APPLIES?

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The two most basic requirements of the open meetings law are that a governmental body:

- (1) give advance public notice of each of its meetings; and
- (2) conduct all of its business in open session, unless an exemption to the open session requirement applies.<sup>106</sup>

### Notice Requirements

Wisconsin Stat. § 19.84, which sets forth the public notice requirements, specifies when, how, and to whom notice must be given, as well as what information a notice must contain.

- **To Whom and How Notice Must Be Given**

The chief presiding officer of a governmental body, or the officer's designee, must give notice of each meeting of the body to: (1) the public; (2) any members of the news media who have submitted a written request for notice; and (3) the official newspaper designated pursuant to state statute or, if none exists, a news medium likely to give notice in the area.<sup>107</sup>

The chief presiding officer shall give notice of a meeting to the public using one of the following methods: (1) posting a notice in at least 3 places likely to give notice to persons affected; (2) posting a notice in at least one public place likely to give notice to persons affected and placing a notice electronically on the governmental body's Internet site; or (3) by paid publication in a news medium likely to give notice to persons affected. If the presiding officer gives notice in the third manner, he or she must ensure that the notice is actually published.<sup>108</sup>

The chief presiding officer must also give notice of each meeting to members of the news media who have submitted a written request for notice.<sup>109</sup> Although this notice may be given in writing or by telephone,<sup>110</sup> it is preferable to give notice in writing to help ensure accuracy and so that a record of the notice exists.<sup>111</sup>

Governmental bodies cannot charge the news media for providing statutorily required notices of public meetings.<sup>112</sup>

In addition, the chief presiding officer must give notice to the officially designated newspaper or, if none exists, to a news medium likely to give notice in the area.<sup>113</sup> The governmental body is not required to pay for and the newspaper is not required to publish such notice.<sup>114</sup> Note, however, the requirement to provide notice to the officially designated newspaper is distinct from the requirement to provide notice to the

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<sup>106</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.83.

<sup>107</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.84(1)(b).

<sup>108</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.84(b); [DeMars Correspondence](#) (Sept. 21, 2021).

<sup>109</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.84(1)(b); [Lawton](#), 2005 WI App 16, ¶¶ 3–4, 7.

<sup>110</sup> [65 Op. Att'y Gen. Preface](#), v–vi (1976).

<sup>111</sup> [65 Op. Att'y Gen. 250](#), 251 (1976).

<sup>112</sup> [77 Op. Att'y Gen. 312](#), 313 (1988).

<sup>113</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.84(1)(b); [Lawton](#), 2005 WI App 16, ¶¶ 3–4, 7.

<sup>114</sup> [66 Op. Att'y Gen. 230](#), 231 (1977).

public. If the chief presiding officer chooses to provide notice to the public by paid publication in a news medium, the chief presiding officer must ensure that the notice is in fact published.<sup>115</sup>

When a specific statute prescribes the type of meeting notice a governmental body must give, the body must comply with the requirements of that statute as well as the notice requirements of the open meetings law.<sup>116</sup> However, violations of those other statutory requirements are not redressable under the open meetings law. For example, the open meetings law is not implicated by a municipality's alleged failure to comply with the public notice requirements of Wis. Stat. ch. 985 when providing published notice of public hearings on proposed tax incremental financing districts.<sup>117</sup> Where a class 1 notice under Wis. Stat. ch. 985 has been published, however, the public notice requirement of the open meetings law is also thereby satisfied.<sup>118</sup>

- **Contents of Notice**

- **In General**

Every public notice of a meeting must give the "time, date, place and subject matter of the meeting, including that intended for consideration at any contemplated closed session, in such form as is reasonably likely to apprise members of the public and the news media thereof."<sup>119</sup> The chief presiding officer of the governmental body is responsible for providing notice, and when he or she is aware of matters which may come before the body, those matters must be included in the meeting notice.<sup>120</sup> The Attorney General's Office has advised that a chief presiding officer may not avoid liability for a legally deficient meeting notice by assigning to a non-member of the body the responsibility to create and provide a notice that complies with Wis. Stat. § 19.84(2).<sup>121</sup>

A frequently recurring question is how specific a subject-matter description in a meeting notice must be. Prior to June 13, 2007, this question was governed by the "bright-line" rule articulated in *State ex rel. H.D. Enterprises II, LLC v. City of Stoughton*.<sup>122</sup> Under that standard, a meeting notice adequately described a subject if it identified "the general topic of items to be discussed" and the simple heading "licenses," without more, was found sufficient to apprise the public that a city council would reconsider a previous decision to deny a liquor license to a particular local grocery store.<sup>123</sup>

On June 13, 2007, the Wisconsin Supreme Court overruled *H.D. Enterprises* and announced a new standard to be applied prospectively to all meeting notices issued after that date.<sup>124</sup> In *State ex rel. Buswell v. Tomah Area School District*, the court held that a public notice for a closed session for the purpose of "consideration and/or action concerning employment/negotiations with district personnel pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c)" was vague, misleading, and legally insufficient, where the school board tentatively approved a collective bargaining agreement between it and the teacher's union.<sup>125</sup> In reaching that conclusion, the court determined that "the plain meaning of

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<sup>115</sup> [DeMars Correspondence](#) (Sept. 29, 2021).

<sup>116</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.84(1)(a).

<sup>117</sup> [See Boyle Correspondence](#) (May 4, 2005).

<sup>118</sup> [Stalle Correspondence](#) (Apr. 10, 2008).

<sup>119</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.84(2).

<sup>120</sup> 66 Op. Att'y Gen. 68, 70 (1977).

<sup>121</sup> [Schuh Correspondence](#) (Oct. 17, 2001).

<sup>122</sup> *State ex rel. H.D. Enters. II, LLC v. City of Stoughton*, 230 Wis. 2d 480, 602 N.W.2d 72 (Ct. App. 1999).

<sup>123</sup> *Id.* at 486–87.

<sup>124</sup> *State ex rel. Buswell v. Tomah Area Sch. Dist.*, 2007 WI 71, 301 Wis. 2d 178, 732 N.W.2d 804.

<sup>125</sup> *Id.* ¶¶ 6–7, 37–38, 41.

Wis. Stat. § 19.84(2) sets forth a reasonableness standard, and that such a standard strikes the proper balance contemplated in Wis. Stat. §§ 19.81(1) and (4) between the public's right to information and the government's need to efficiently conduct its business."<sup>126</sup> This reasonableness standard "requires a case-specific analysis" and "whether notice is sufficiently specific will depend upon what is reasonable under the circumstances."<sup>127</sup> In making that determination, the factors to be considered include: "[1] the burden of providing more detailed notice, [2] whether the subject is of particular public interest, and [3] whether it involves non-routine action that the public would be unlikely to anticipate."<sup>128</sup>

The first factor "balances the policy of providing greater information with the requirement that providing such information be 'compatible with the conduct of governmental affairs.' Wis. Stat. § 19.81(1)."<sup>129</sup> The determination must be made on a case-by-case basis.<sup>130</sup> "[T]he demands of specificity should not thwart the efficient administration of governmental business."<sup>131</sup>

The second factor takes into account "both the number of people interested and the intensity of that interest," though the level of interest is not dispositive, and must be balanced with other factors on a case-by-case basis.<sup>132</sup>

The third factor considers "whether the subject of the meeting is routine or novel."<sup>133</sup> There may be less need for specificity where a meeting subject occurs routinely, because members of the public are more likely to anticipate that the subject will be addressed.<sup>134</sup> "Novel issues may . . . require more specific notice."<sup>135</sup>

Whether a meeting notice is reasonable, according to the court, "cannot be determined from the standpoint of when the meeting actually takes place," but rather must be "based upon what information is available to the officer noticing the meeting at the time the notice is provided, and based upon what it would be reasonable for the officer to know."<sup>136</sup> Once reasonable notice has been given, "meeting participants would be free to discuss any aspect of the noticed subject matter, as well as issues that are reasonably related to it."<sup>137</sup> However, "a meeting cannot address topics unrelated to the information in the notice."<sup>138</sup> The Attorney General has similarly advised, in an informal opinion, that if a meeting notice contains a general subject matter designation and a subject that was not specifically noticed comes up at the meeting, a governmental body should refrain from engaging in any information gathering or discussion or from taking any action that would deprive the public of information about the conduct of governmental business.<sup>139</sup>

Whether a meeting notice reasonably apprises the public of the meeting's subject matter may also depend, in part, on the surrounding circumstances. A notice that might be adequate, standing alone, may nonetheless fail to provide reasonable notice if it is accompanied by other statements

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<sup>126</sup> *Id.* ¶ 3.

<sup>127</sup> *Id.* ¶ 22.

<sup>128</sup> *Id.* ¶ 28.

<sup>129</sup> *Id.* ¶ 29.

<sup>130</sup> *Id.*

<sup>131</sup> *Id.*

<sup>132</sup> *Id.* ¶ 30.

<sup>133</sup> *Id.* ¶ 31.

<sup>134</sup> *Id.*

<sup>135</sup> *Id.*

<sup>136</sup> *Id.* ¶ 32.

<sup>137</sup> *Id.* ¶ 34.

<sup>138</sup> *Id.*

<sup>139</sup> I-05-93 (Apr. 26, 1993).

or actions that expressly contradict it, or if the notice is misleading when considered in the light of long-standing policies of the governmental body.<sup>140</sup>

In order to draft a meeting notice that complies with the reasonableness standard, a good rule of thumb is to ask whether a person interested in a specific subject would be aware, upon reading the notice, that the subject might be discussed. In an unpublished, post-*Buswell* decision, the court of appeals determined that a meeting notice for a closed session of a school board under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c) for the purpose of “[d]iscussion of the role, duties, and responsibilities of the [l]ibrary [d]irector and evaluation of job performance and possible action” gave sufficient public notice of the board’s discussion of the discipline and termination of the library director.<sup>141</sup> The court reasoned that, under *Buswell*, the “sufficiency of the notice will be based on the knowledge of the person posting notice at the time when it is posted.”<sup>142</sup>

- **Generic Agenda Items**

Purely generic subject matter designations such as “old business,” “new business,” “miscellaneous business,” “agenda revisions,” or “such other matters as are authorized by law” are insufficient because, standing alone, they identify no particular subjects at all.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, the use of a notice heading that merely refers to an earlier meeting of the governmental body (or of some other body) without identifying any particular subject of discussion is so lacking in informational value that it almost certainly fails to give the public reasonable notice of what the governmental body intends to discuss.<sup>144</sup> If such a notice is meant to indicate an intent to simply receive and approve minutes of the designated meeting, it should so indicate and discussion should be limited to whether the minutes accurately reflect the substance of that meeting.<sup>145</sup>

Likewise, the Attorney General has advised that the practice of using such designations as “mayor comments,” “alderman comments,” or “staff comments” for the purpose of communicating information on matters within the scope of the governmental body’s authority “is, at best, at the outer edge of lawful practice, and may well cross the line to become unlawful.”<sup>146</sup> Because members and officials of governmental bodies have greater opportunities for input into the agenda-setting process than the public has, they should be held to a higher standard of specificity regarding the subjects they intend to address.<sup>147</sup>

- **Action Agenda Items**

The Wisconsin Court of Appeals has noted that “Wis. Stat. § 19.84(2) does not expressly require that the notice indicate whether a meeting will be purely deliberative or if action will be taken.”<sup>148</sup> The *Buswell* decision inferred from the court of appeals that “adequate notice . . . may not require information about whether a vote on a subject will occur, so long as the subject matter of the vote

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<sup>140</sup> [Linde Correspondence](#) (May 4, 2007); [Koss Correspondence](#) (May 30, 2007); [Musolf Correspondence](#) (July 13, 2007); [Martinson Correspondence](#) (Mar. 2, 2009).

<sup>141</sup> *State ex rel. Wanninger v. City of Manitowoc Pub. Libr. Bd.*, No. 2011AP1059, 2012 WL 1192048, ¶¶ 19–21 (Wis. Ct. App. Apr. 11, 2012) (unpublished).

<sup>142</sup> *Id.* ¶ 21 (citing *Buswell*, 2007 WI 71, ¶ 32).

<sup>143</sup> [Becker Correspondence](#) (Nov. 30, 2004); [Heupel Correspondence](#) (Aug. 29, 2006).

<sup>144</sup> [Erickson Correspondence](#) (Apr. 22, 2009).

<sup>145</sup> *Id.*

<sup>146</sup> [Rude Correspondence](#) (Mar. 5, 2004).

<sup>147</sup> [Thompson Correspondence](#) (Sept. 3, 2004).

<sup>148</sup> *State ex rel. Olson v. City of Baraboo Joint Rev. Bd.*, 2002 WI App 64, ¶ 15, 252 Wis. 2d 628, 643 N.W.2d 796.

is adequately specified.”<sup>149</sup> Both in *Olson* and in *Buswell*, however, the courts reiterated the principle—first recognized in *Badke*<sup>150</sup>—that the information in the notice must be sufficient to alert the public to the importance of the meeting, so that they can make an informed decision whether to attend.<sup>151</sup> The *Olson* decision thus acknowledged that, in some circumstances, a failure to expressly state whether action will be taken at a meeting could be a violation of the open meetings law.<sup>152</sup> Although the courts have not articulated the specific standard to apply to this question, it appears to follow from *Buswell* that the test would be whether, under the particular factual circumstances of the case, the notice reasonably alerts the public to the importance of the meeting.<sup>153</sup>

Another frequently asked question is whether a governmental body may act on a motion for reconsideration of a matter voted on at a previous meeting if the motion is brought under a general subject matter designation. The Attorney General has advised that a member may move for reconsideration under a general subject matter designation, but that any discussion or action on the motion should be set over to a later meeting for which specific notice of the subject matter of the motion is given.<sup>154</sup>

- **Notice of Closed Sessions**

The notice provision in Wis. Stat. § 19.84(2) requires that if the chief presiding officer or the officer’s designee knows at the time he or she gives notice of a meeting that a closed session is contemplated, the notice must contain the subject matter to be considered in closed session. Such notice “must contain enough information for the public to discern whether the subject matter is authorized for closed session under § 19.85(1).”<sup>155</sup> The Attorney General has advised that notice of closed sessions must contain the specific nature of the business, as well as the exemption(s) under which the chief presiding officer believes a closed session is authorized.<sup>156</sup> Merely identifying and quoting from a statutory exemption does not reasonably identify any particular subject that might be taken up thereunder and thus is not adequate notice of a closed session.<sup>157</sup> In *State ex rel. Schaeve v. Van Lare*, the court held that a notice to convene in closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(b) “to conduct a hearing to consider the possible discipline of a public employee” was sufficient.<sup>158</sup>

- **Time of Notice**

Wisconsin Statute § 19.84(3) requires that every public notice of a meeting be given at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting, unless “for good cause” such notice is “impossible or impractical.” If “good cause” exists, the notice should be given as soon as possible and must be given at least two hours in advance of the meeting.<sup>159</sup>

No Wisconsin court decisions or Attorney General opinions discuss what constitutes “good cause” to provide less than twenty-four-hour notice of a meeting. This provision, like all other provisions of the open

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<sup>149</sup> *Buswell*, 2007 WI 71, ¶ 37 n.7.

<sup>150</sup> *Badke*, 173 Wis. 2d at 573-74, 577-78.

<sup>151</sup> *Buswell*, 2007 WI 71, ¶ 26; *Olson*, 2002 WI App 64, ¶ 15.

<sup>152</sup> *Olson*, 2002 WI App 64, ¶ 15.

<sup>153</sup> *Herbst Correspondence* (July 16, 2008).

<sup>154</sup> *Bukowski Correspondence* (May 5, 1986).

<sup>155</sup> *Buswell*, 2007 WI 71, ¶ 37 n.7.

<sup>156</sup> 66 Op. Att’y Gen. 93, 98.

<sup>157</sup> *Weinschenk Correspondence* (Dec. 29, 2006); *Anderson Correspondence* (Feb. 13, 2007).

<sup>158</sup> *State ex rel. Schaeve v. Van Lare*, 125 Wis. 2d 40, 47, 370 N.W.2d 271 (Ct. App. 1985).

<sup>159</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.84(3).



meetings law, must be construed in favor of providing the public with the fullest and most complete information about governmental affairs as is compatible with the conduct of governmental business.<sup>160</sup> If there is any doubt whether “good cause” exists, the governmental body should provide the full twenty-four-hour notice.

When calculating the 24-hour notice period, Wis. Stat. § 990.001(4)(a) requires that Sundays and legal holidays be excluded. Posting notice of a Monday meeting on the preceding Sunday is, therefore, inadequate, but posting such notice on the preceding Saturday would suffice, as long as the posting location is open to the public on Saturdays.<sup>161</sup>

Wisconsin Stat. § 19.84(4) provides that separate notice for each meeting of a governmental body must be given at a date and time reasonably close to the meeting date. A single notice that lists all the meetings that a governmental body plans to hold over a given week, month, or year does not comply with the notice requirements of the open meetings law.<sup>162</sup> Similarly, a meeting notice that states that a quorum of various town governmental bodies may participate at the same time in a multi-month, on-line discussion of town issues fails to satisfy the “separate notice” requirement.<sup>163</sup>

University of Wisconsin departments and their subunits, as well as the Olympic ice training rink, are exempt from the specific notice requirements in Wis. Stat. § 19.84(1)–(4). Those bodies are simply required to provide notice “which is reasonably likely to apprise interested persons, and news media who have filed written requests for such notice.”<sup>164</sup> Also exempt from the specific notice requirements are certain meetings of subunits of parent bodies held during or immediately before or after a meeting of the parent body.<sup>165</sup>

- **Compliance with Notice**

A governmental body, when conducting a meeting, is free to discuss any aspect of any subject identified in the public notice of that meeting, as well as issues reasonably related to that subject, but may not address any topics that are not reasonably related to the information in the notice.<sup>166</sup> There is no requirement, however, that a governmental body must follow the agenda in the order listed on the meeting notice, unless a particular agenda item has been noticed for a specific time.<sup>167</sup> Nor is a governmental body required to actually discuss every item contained in the public notice. It is reasonable, in appropriate circumstances, for a body to cancel a previously planned discussion or postpone it to a later date.<sup>168</sup>

## Open Session Requirements

- **Accessibility**

In addition to requiring advance public notice of every meeting of a governmental body, the open meetings law also requires that “all meetings of all state and local governmental bodies shall be publicly held in places reasonably accessible to members of the public and shall be open to all citizens at all times.”<sup>169</sup> Similarly, an “open session” is defined as “a meeting which is held in a place reasonably accessible to

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<sup>160</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.81(1), (4).

<sup>161</sup> [Caylor Correspondence](#) (Dec. 6, 2007).

<sup>162</sup> See 63 Op. Att’y Gen. 509, 513.

<sup>163</sup> [Connors/Haag Correspondence](#) (May 26, 2009).

<sup>164</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.84(5).

<sup>165</sup> See Wis. Stat. § 19.84(6).

<sup>166</sup> [Buswell](#), 2007 WI 71, ¶ 34.

<sup>167</sup> [Stencil Correspondence](#) (Mar. 6, 2008).

<sup>168</sup> [Black Correspondence](#) (Apr. 22, 2009).

<sup>169</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.81(2).

members of the public and open to all citizens at all times.”<sup>170</sup> Every meeting of a governmental body must initially be convened in “open session.”<sup>171</sup> All business of any kind, formal or informal, must be initiated, discussed, and acted upon in “open session,” unless one of the exemptions set forth in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) applies.<sup>172</sup>

The requirement that meeting locations be reasonably accessible to the public and open to all citizens at all times means that governmental bodies must hold their meetings in rooms that are reasonably calculated to be large enough to accommodate all citizens who wish to attend the meetings.<sup>173</sup> Absolute access is not, however, required.<sup>174</sup> In *Badke*, for instance, the Wisconsin Supreme Court concluded that a village board meeting that was held in a village hall capable of holding 55–75 people was reasonably accessible, although three members of the public were turned away due to overcrowding.<sup>175</sup> Whether a meeting place is reasonably accessible depends on the facts in each individual case. Any doubt as to whether a meeting facility—or remote meeting platform—has sufficient capacity to satisfy the requirement should be resolved in favor of holding the meeting in a larger facility and/or using a remote meeting platform with greater capacity.<sup>176</sup>

- **In-Person Meetings**

The policy of openness and accessibility favors governmental bodies holding their meetings in public places, such as a municipal hall or school, rather than on private premises.<sup>177</sup> The law prohibits meetings on private premises that are not open and reasonably accessible to the public.<sup>178</sup> Generally speaking, places such as a private room in a restaurant or a dining room in a private club are not considered “reasonably accessible.” A governmental body should meet on private premises only in exceptional cases, where the governmental body has a specific reason for doing so which does not compromise the public’s right to information about governmental affairs.

The policy of openness and accessibility also requires that governmental bodies hold their meetings at locations near to the public they serve. Accordingly, the Attorney General has concluded that a school board meeting held forty miles from the district which the school board served was not “reasonably accessible” within the meaning of the open meetings law.<sup>179</sup> The Attorney General advises that, in order to comply with the “reasonably accessible” requirement, governmental bodies should conduct all their meetings at a location within the territory they serve, unless there are special circumstances that make it impossible or impractical to do so.<sup>180</sup>

Occasionally, a governmental body may need to leave the place where the meeting began in order to accomplish its business—*e.g.*, inspection of a property or construction projects. The Attorney General’s Office has advised that such off-site business may be conducted consistently with the requirements of the open meetings law, as long as certain precautions are taken:

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<sup>170</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(3)

<sup>171</sup> See Wis. Stat. §§ 19.83, 19.85(1).

<sup>172</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.83.

<sup>173</sup> *Badke*, 173 Wis. 2d at 580–81.

<sup>174</sup> *Id.*

<sup>175</sup> *Id.* at 561, 563, 581.

<sup>176</sup> [Madsen Correspondence](#) (Jan. 27, 2023).

<sup>177</sup> See 67 Op. Att’y Gen. 125, 127 (1978).

<sup>178</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.82(3).

<sup>179</sup> [Miller Correspondence](#) (May 25, 1977).

<sup>180</sup> I-29-91 (Oct. 17, 1991).

- 1) First, the public notice of the meeting must list all of the locations to be visited in the order in which they will be visited. This makes it possible for a member of the public to follow the governmental body to each location or to join the governmental body at any particular location;
- 2) Second, each location at which government business is to be conducted must itself be reasonably accessible to the public at all times when such business is taking place; and
- 3) Third, care must be taken to ensure that government business is discussed only during those times when the members of the body are convened at one of the particular locations for which notice has been given. The members of the governmental body may travel together or separately, but if half or more of them travel together, they may not discuss government business when their vehicle is in motion, because a moving vehicle is not accessible to the public.<sup>181</sup>

A governmental body holding an in-person meeting is encouraged to also offer a remote option for the public to attend such a meeting. However, the public’s right to attend an in-person meeting of a governmental body cannot be limited to only remote options.

- o **Remote Meetings**

The open meetings law “does not require that all meetings be held in publicly owned places but rather, in places ‘reasonably accessible to members of the public.’”<sup>182</sup> Accordingly, the Attorney General has long advised that governmental bodies may convene their meetings via telephone or video conference.<sup>183</sup> It should be noted that the courts have not resolved the question of whether the practice of convening meetings in this matter is always permissible.<sup>184</sup>

When an open meeting is held by teleconference or video conference, the public must have a means of monitoring the meeting. A governmental body will typically be able to meet this obligation by providing the public with information (in accordance with notice requirements) for joining the meeting remotely, even if there is no central in-person location at which the public can convene for the meeting. A governmental body conducting a meeting remotely should be mindful of the possibility that it may be particularly burdensome, or even infeasible, for one or more individuals who would like to observe a meeting to do so remotely—for example, for people without telephone or internet access or who are deaf or hard of hearing—and appropriate accommodations should be made to facilitate reasonable access to the meeting for such individuals.<sup>185</sup>

The Attorney General’s Office has advised that providing only remote access to an open meeting is not always permissible. For example, where a complex plan, drawing, or chart is needed for display or the demeanor of a witness is significant, a meeting held by telephone conference likely would not be “reasonably accessible” to the public because important aspects of the discussion or deliberation would not be communicated to the public.<sup>186</sup> Furthermore, what is considered

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<sup>181</sup> [Rappert Correspondence](#) (Apr. 8, 1993); [Musolf Correspondence](#) (July 13, 2007).

<sup>182</sup> [69 Op. Att’y Gen. 143, 144](#) (1980) (quoting [47 Op. Att’y Gen. 126](#) (1978)).

<sup>183</sup> *Id.* at 146.

<sup>184</sup> Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) and Open Meetings](#) (Mar. 16, 2020); Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Additional Information Regarding Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) and Open Meetings](#) (Mar. 20, 2020); Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Sunshine Week and the Continued Importance of Ensuring that Open Meetings are Reasonably Accessible During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Mar. 15, 2021).

<sup>185</sup> Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) and Open Meetings](#) (Mar. 16, 2020); Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Additional Information Regarding Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) and Open Meetings](#) (Mar. 20, 2020); Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Sunshine Week and the Continued Importance of Ensuring that Open Meetings are Reasonably Accessible During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Mar. 15, 2021).

<sup>186</sup> *See* [69 Op. Att’y Gen. at 145](#).

“reasonably accessible” in certain circumstances, such as during a pandemic, during which health officials encourage social distancing, may be different than in other circumstances. Ultimately, whether a meeting is “reasonably accessible” is a factual question that must be determined on a case-by-case basis.<sup>187</sup>

Wisconsin DOJ encouraged governmental bodies to retain practices adopted to promote transparency during the COVID-19 pandemic to the extent those practices increase accessibility. By maintaining a remote option for public access to meetings or posting recordings of meetings as soon as practicable after meetings conclude, governmental bodies can advance the open meetings law’s purpose of ensuring governmental openness and transparency.<sup>188</sup>

- **Access for Persons with Disabilities**

The public accessibility requirements of the open meetings law have long been interpreted by the Attorney General as meaning that every meeting subject to the law must be held in a location that is “reasonably accessible to all citizens, including those with disabilities.”<sup>189</sup> In selecting a meeting facility that satisfies this requirement, a local governmental body has more leeway than does a state governmental body. For a state body, the facility must have physical characteristics that permit persons with functional limitations to enter, circulate, and leave the facility *without* assistance.<sup>190</sup> In the case of a local governmental body, however, a meeting facility must have physical characteristics that permit persons with functional limitations to enter, circulate, and leave the facility *with* assistance.<sup>191</sup> In order to optimally comply with the spirit of open government, however, local bodies should also, whenever possible, meet in buildings and rooms that are accessible without assistance.

The Americans with Disabilities Act and other federal laws governing the rights of persons with disabilities may additionally require governmental bodies to meet accessibility and reasonable accommodation requirements that exceed the requirements imposed by Wisconsin’s open meetings law. For more detailed assistance regarding such matters, both government officials and members of the public are encouraged to consult with their own attorneys or to contact the appropriate federal enforcement authorities.

- **Recording, Filming, and Photographing**

The open meetings law grants citizens the right to attend and observe meetings of governmental bodies that are held in open session. The open meetings law also specifies that citizens may record, film, or photograph open session meetings, as long as doing so does not disrupt the meeting. The law explicitly states that a governmental body must make a reasonable effort to accommodate anyone who wants to record, film, or photograph an open session meeting, as long as the activity does not interfere with the conduct of the meeting or the rights of the participants.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> *Id.*; Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) and Open Meetings](#) (Mar. 16, 2020); Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Additional Information Regarding Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) and Open Meetings](#) (Mar. 20, 2020); Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Sunshine Week and the Continued Importance of Ensuring that Open Meetings are Reasonably Accessible During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Mar. 15, 2021).

<sup>188</sup> Office of Open Government, Advisory, [Sunshine Week and the Continued Importance of Ensuring that Open Meetings are Reasonably Accessible During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Mar. 15, 2021).

<sup>189</sup> 69 Op. Att’y Gen. 251, 252 (1980).

<sup>190</sup> See Wis. Stat. §§ 19.82(3), 101.13(1); 69 Op. Att’y Gen. at 252.

<sup>191</sup> 69 Op. Att’y Gen. at 253.

<sup>192</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.90.

In contrast, the open meetings law does not require a governmental body to permit recording of an authorized closed session.<sup>193</sup> If a governmental body wishes to record its own closed meetings, it should arrange for the security of the records to prevent their improper disclosure.<sup>194</sup>

- **Citizen Participation**

In general, the open meetings law grants citizens the right to attend and observe open session meetings of governmental bodies, but does not require a governmental body to allow members of the public to speak or actively participate in the body's meeting.<sup>195</sup> There are some other state statutes that require governmental bodies to hold public hearings on specified matters.<sup>196</sup> Unless such a statute specifically applies, however, a governmental body is free to determine for itself whether and to what extent it will allow citizen participation at its meetings.<sup>197</sup>

Although it is not required, the open meetings law does permit a governmental body to set aside a portion of an open meeting as a public comment period.<sup>198</sup> Such a period must be included on the meeting notice. During such a period, the body may receive information from the public and may discuss any matter raised by the public. If a member of the public raises a subject that does not appear on the meeting notice, however, it is advisable to limit the discussion of that subject and to defer any extensive deliberation to a later meeting for which more specific notice can be given. In addition, the body may not take formal action on a subject raised in the public comment period, unless that subject is also identified in the meeting notice.<sup>199</sup>

- **Ballots, Votes, and Records, Including Meeting Minutes**

No secret ballot may be used to determine any election or decision of a governmental body, except the election of officers of a body.<sup>200</sup> For example, a body cannot vote by secret ballot to fill a vacancy on a city council.<sup>201</sup> If a member of a governmental body requests that the vote of each member on a particular matter be recorded, a voice vote or a vote by a show of hands is not permissible unless the vote is unanimous and the minutes reflect who is present for the vote.<sup>202</sup> A governmental body may not use email ballots to decide matters, even if the result of the vote is later ratified at a properly noticed meeting.<sup>203</sup>

The open meetings law requires a governmental body to create and preserve a record of all motions and roll-call votes at its meetings.<sup>204</sup> This requirement applies to both open and closed sessions.<sup>205</sup> Written minutes are the most common method used to comply with the requirement, but they are not the only permissible method. It can also be satisfied if the motions and roll-call votes are recorded and preserved in some other way, such as on a tape recording.<sup>206</sup> As long as the body creates and preserves a record of all motions and roll-call votes, it is not required by the open meetings law to take more formal or detailed minutes of other aspects of the meeting. Other statutes outside the open meetings law, however, may

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<sup>193</sup> 66 Op. Att'y Gen. 318, 325 (1977); [Maroney Correspondence](#) (Oct. 31, 2006).

<sup>194</sup> 66 Op. Att'y Gen. at 325.

<sup>195</sup> [Lundquist Correspondence](#) (Oct. 25, 2005).

<sup>196</sup> See, e.g., Wis. Stat. §§ 65.90(4) (requiring public hearing before adoption of a municipal budget), 66.1105(4)(a) (requiring public hearing before creation of a tax incremental finance district).

<sup>197</sup> [Zwieg Correspondence](#) (July 13, 2006); [Chiaverotti Correspondence](#) (Sept. 19, 2006).

<sup>198</sup> Wis. Stat. §§ 19.83(2), 19.84(2).

<sup>199</sup> [Sayles Correspondence](#) (Aug. 4, 2017).

<sup>200</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.88(1).

<sup>201</sup> 65 Op. Att'y Gen. 131 (1976).

<sup>202</sup> I-95-89 (Nov. 13, 1989).

<sup>203</sup> I-01-10 (Jan. 25, 2010).

<sup>204</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.88(3).

<sup>205</sup> [De Moya Correspondence](#) (June 17, 2009).

<sup>206</sup> I-95-89 (Nov. 13, 1989).

prescribe particular minute-taking requirements for certain governmental bodies and officials that go beyond what is required by the open meetings law.<sup>207</sup>

The open meetings law does not specify a timeframe in which a body must create a record of all motions and roll-call votes. In the absence of a specific statutory timeframe, issues can arise. In *Journal Times v. City of Racine Board of Police and Fire Commissioners*, the Racine Board of Police and Fire Commissioners voted on a motion in a closed session meeting, but did not contemporaneously create a record of the motion.<sup>208</sup> Instead, the motion was included in the minutes of the meeting, which were not finished and approved by the Commission until three months after the meeting. In a non-party brief, Wisconsin DOJ argued that Wis. Stat. § 19.88(3) should be construed as requiring that a record of all motions must be made at the time of the meeting in question or as soon thereafter as practicable.<sup>209</sup> While the court resolved the case on other grounds without deciding this issue, as a best practice, it is advisable that the motions and roll call votes of a meeting of a governmental body be recorded at the time of the meeting or as soon thereafter as practicable.

Although Wis. Stat. § 19.88(3) does not indicate how detailed the record of motions and votes should be, the general legislative policy of the open meetings law is that “the public is entitled to the fullest and most complete information regarding the affairs of government as is compatible with the conduct of governmental business.”<sup>210</sup> In light of that policy, it seems clear that a governmental body’s records should provide the public with a reasonably intelligible description of the essential substantive elements of every motion made, who initiated and seconded the motion, the outcome of any vote on the motion, and, if a roll-call vote, how each member voted.<sup>211</sup>

Nothing in the open meetings law prohibits a body from making decisions by general consent, without a formal vote, but such informal procedures are typically only appropriate for routine procedural matters such as approving the minutes of prior meetings or adjourning. In any event, regardless of whether a decision is made by consensus or by some other method, Wis. Stat. § 19.88(3) still requires the body to create and preserve a meaningful record of that decision.<sup>212</sup> “Consent agendas,” whereby a body discusses individual items of business under separate agenda headings, but takes action on all discussed items by adopting a single motion to approve all the items previously discussed, are likely insufficient to satisfy the recordkeeping requirements of Wis. Stat. § 19.88(3).<sup>213</sup>

Wisconsin Stat. § 19.88(3) also provides that meeting records created under that statute—whether for an open or a closed session—must be open to public inspection to the extent prescribed in the state public records law. Because the records law contains no general exemption for records created during a closed session, a custodian must release such items unless the particular record at issue is subject to a specific statutory exemption or the custodian concludes that the harm to the public from its release would outweigh the benefit to the public.<sup>214</sup> There is a strong presumption under the public records law that release of records is in the public interest. As long as the reasons for convening in closed session continue to exist, however, the custodian may be able to justify not disclosing any information that requires confidentiality. But the custodian still must separate information that can be made public from that which cannot and must disclose the former, even if the latter can be withheld. In addition, once the underlying purpose for the

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<sup>207</sup> [I-20-89](#) (Mar. 8, 1989); see, e.g., Wis. Stat. §§ 59.23(2)(a) (county clerk), 60.33(2)(a) (town clerk), 61.25(3) (village clerk), 62.09(11)(b) (city clerk), 62.13(5)(i) (police and fire commission), 66.1001(4)(b) (plan commission), 70.47(7)(bb) (board of review).

<sup>208</sup> *J. Times v. City of Racine Bd. of Police & Fire Comm’rs*, 2015 WI 56, 362 Wis. 2d 577, 866 N.W.2d 563.

<sup>209</sup> Non-party Brief of Wisconsin Department of Justice at 6, *J. Times v. City of Racine Bd. of Police & Fire Comm’rs*, 2015 WI 56 (No. 2013AP1715).

<sup>210</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.81(1).

<sup>211</sup> [De Moya Correspondence](#) (June 17, 2009).

<sup>212</sup> [Huebscher Correspondence](#) (May 23, 2008).

<sup>213</sup> [Perlick Correspondence](#) (May 12, 2005).

<sup>214</sup> [De Moya Correspondence](#) (June 17, 2009).

closed session ceases to exist, all records of the session must then be provided to any person requesting them.<sup>215</sup>

## WHEN IS IT PERMISSIBLE TO CONVENE IN CLOSED SESSION?

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Every meeting of a governmental body must initially be convened in open session. All business of any kind, formal or informal, must be initiated, discussed, and acted upon in open session unless one of the exemptions in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) applies.<sup>216</sup>

### Notice of Closed Session

The notice provision in Wis. Stat. § 19.84(2) requires that, if the chief presiding officer of a governmental body is aware that a closed session is contemplated at the time he or she gives public notice of the meeting, the notice must contain the subject matter of the closed session.

If the chief presiding officer was not aware of a contemplated closed session at the time he or she gave notice of the meeting, that does not foreclose a governmental body from going into closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) to discuss an item contained in the notice for the open session.<sup>217</sup> In both cases, a governmental body must follow the procedure set forth in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) before going into closed session.

### Procedure for Convening in Closed Session

Every meeting of a governmental body must initially be convened in open session.<sup>218</sup> Before convening in closed session, the governmental body must follow the procedure set forth in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) which requires that the governmental body pass a motion, by recorded majority vote, to convene in closed session. If a motion is unanimous, there is no requirement to record the votes individually.<sup>219</sup> Before the governmental body votes on the motion, the chief presiding officer must announce and record in open session the nature of the business to be discussed and the specific statutory exemption which is claimed to authorize the closed session.<sup>220</sup> Stating only the statute section number of the applicable exemption is not sufficient because many exemptions contain more than one reason for authorizing closure. For example, Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c) allows governmental bodies to use closed sessions to interview candidates for positions of employment, to consider promotions of particular employees, to consider the compensation of particular employees, and to conduct employee evaluations—each of which is a different reason that should be identified in the meeting notice and in the motion to convene into closed session.<sup>221</sup> Similarly, merely identifying and quoting from a statutory exemption does not adequately announce what particular part of the governmental body's business is to be considered under that exemption.<sup>222</sup> Enough specificity is needed in describing the subject matter of the contemplated closed meeting to enable the members of the governmental body to intelligently vote on the motion to close the meeting.<sup>223</sup> If several exemptions are relied on to authorize a closed discussion of several subjects, the motion should make it clear which exemptions correspond

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<sup>215</sup> See 67 Op. Att'y Gen. 117, 119 (1978).

<sup>216</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.83.

<sup>217</sup> 66 Op. Att'y Gen. 106, 108 (1977).

<sup>218</sup> Wis. Stat. §§ 19.83, 19.85(1).

<sup>219</sup> *Schaeve*, 125 Wis. 2d at 51.

<sup>220</sup> 66 Op. Att'y Gen. 93, 97-98.

<sup>221</sup> *Reynolds/Kreibich Correspondence* (Oct. 23, 2003).

<sup>222</sup> *Weinschenk Correspondence* (Dec. 29, 2006); *Anderson Correspondence* (Feb. 13, 2007).

<sup>223</sup> *Heule Correspondence* (June 29, 1977); see also *Buswell*, 2007 WI 71, ¶ 37 n.7.

to which subjects.<sup>224</sup> The governmental body must limit its discussion in closed session to the business specified in the announcement.<sup>225</sup>

## Authorized Closed Sessions

Wisconsin Stat. § 19.85(1) contains eleven exemptions to the open session requirement which permit, but do not require, a governmental body to convene in closed session.<sup>226</sup> Because the law is designed to provide the public with the most complete information possible regarding the affairs of government, exemptions should be strictly construed.<sup>227</sup> The policy of the open meetings law dictates that the exemptions be invoked sparingly and only where necessary to protect the public interest. If there is any doubt as to whether closure is permitted under a given exemption, the governmental body should hold the meeting in open session.<sup>228</sup>

The following are some of the most frequently cited exemptions.

- **Judicial or Quasi-Judicial Hearings**

Wisconsin Stat. § 19.85(1)(a) authorizes a closed session for “[d]eliberating concerning a case which was the subject of any judicial or quasi-judicial trial or hearing before that governmental body.” In order for this exemption to apply, there must be a “case” that is the subject of a quasi-judicial proceeding.<sup>229</sup> The Wisconsin Supreme Court held that the term “case” contemplates a controversy among parties that are adverse to one another; it does not include a mere request for a permit.<sup>230</sup> An example of a governmental body that considers “cases” and thus can convene in closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(a), where appropriate, is the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission.<sup>231</sup> However, bodies that consider zoning appeals, such as boards of zoning appeals and boards of adjustment, may not convene in closed session.<sup>232</sup> Additionally, the meetings of town, village, and city boards of review regarding appeals of property tax assessments must also be conducted in open session.<sup>233</sup>

- **Employment and Licensing Matters**

- **Consideration of Dismissal, Demotion, Discipline, Licensing, and Tenure**

Two of the statutory exemptions to the open session requirement relate specifically to employment or licensing of an individual. The first, Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(b), authorizes a closed session for:

Considering dismissal, demotion, licensing or discipline of any public employee or person licensed by a board or commission or the investigation of charges against such person, or considering the grant or denial of tenure for a university faculty member, and the taking of formal action on any such matter . . . .

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<sup>224</sup> [Brisco Correspondence](#) (Dec. 13, 2005).

<sup>225</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1).

<sup>226</sup> [Krueger Correspondence](#) (Feb. 13, 2019).

<sup>227</sup> *State ex rel. Hodge v. Town of Turtle Lake*, 180 Wis. 2d 62, 71, 508 N.W.2d 603 (1993); *Citizens for Responsible Dev.*, 2007 WI App 114, ¶ 8.

<sup>228</sup> See 74 Op. Att’y Gen. 70, 73 (1985).

<sup>229</sup> *Hodge*, 180 Wis. 2d at 72; cf. *State ex rel. Cities Serv. Oil Co. v. Bd. of Appeals of Milwaukee*, 21 Wis. 2d 516, 537, 124 N.W.2d 809 (1963) (allowing zoning appeal boards to deliberate in closed session after hearing, decided before the Legislature added the “case” requirement in 1977).

<sup>230</sup> *Hodge*, 180 Wis. 2d at 74.

<sup>231</sup> 68 Op. Att’y Gen. 171 (1979).

<sup>232</sup> Wis. Stat. §§ 59.694 (counties), 60.65(5) (towns), 62.23(7)(e)3. (cities); [White Correspondence](#) (May 1, 2009).

<sup>233</sup> Wis. Stat. § 70.47(2m).



If a closed session for such a purpose will include an evidentiary hearing or final action, then the governmental body must give the public employee or licensee actual notice of that closed hearing and/or closed final action. Evidentiary hearings are characterized by the formal examination of charges and by taking testimony and receiving evidence in support or defense of specific charges that may have been made.<sup>234</sup> Such hearings may be required by statute, ordinance or rule, by collective bargaining agreement, or by circumstances in which the employee or licensee is the subject of charges that might damage the person's good name, reputation, honor or integrity, or where the governmental body's action might impose substantial stigma or disability upon the person.<sup>235</sup>

Where actual notice is required, the notice must state that the person has a right to request that any such evidentiary hearing or final action be conducted in open session. If the person makes such a request, the governmental body may not conduct an evidentiary hearing or take final action in closed session. The body may, however, convene in closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(b) for the purpose of deliberating about the dismissal, demotion, licensing, discipline, or investigation of charges. Following such closed deliberations, the body may reconvene in open session and take final action related to the person's employment or license.<sup>236</sup>

Nothing in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) permits a person who is not a member of the governmental body to demand that the body meet in closed session. The Wisconsin Court of Appeals held that a governmental body was not required to comply with a public employee's request that the body convene in closed session to vote on the employee's dismissal.<sup>237</sup>

- **Consideration of Employment, Promotion, Compensation, and Performance Evaluations**

The second exemption which relates to employment matters authorizes a closed session for "[c]onsidering employment, promotion, compensation or performance evaluation data of any public employee over which the governmental body has jurisdiction or exercises responsibility."<sup>238</sup>

The Attorney General's Office has interpreted this exemption to extend to public officers, such as a police chief, whom the governmental body has jurisdiction to employ.<sup>239</sup> The Attorney General's Office has also concluded that this exemption is sufficiently broad to authorize convening in closed session to interview and consider applicants for positions of employment.<sup>240</sup>

An elected official is not considered a "public employee over which the governmental body has jurisdiction or exercises responsibility."<sup>241</sup> Thus, Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c) does not authorize a county board to convene in closed session to consider appointments of county board members to a county board committee.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> 66 Op. Att'y Gen. 211, 214 (1977).

<sup>235</sup> *Id.*

<sup>236</sup> See *State ex rel. Epping v. City of Neillsville Common Council*, 218 Wis. 2d 516, 581 N.W.2d 548 (Ct. App. 1998); *Johnson Correspondence* (Feb. 27, 2009).

<sup>237</sup> *Schaeve*, 125 Wis. 2d at 40.

<sup>238</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c).

<sup>239</sup> *Caturia Correspondence* (Sept. 20, 1982).

<sup>240</sup> *Id.*

<sup>241</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c).

<sup>242</sup> 76 Op. Att'y Gen. 276 (1987).

The language of the exemption refers to a “public employee” rather than to positions of employment in general. The apparent purpose of the exemption is to protect individual employees from having their actions and abilities discussed in public and to protect governmental bodies “from potential lawsuits resulting from open discussion of sensitive information.”<sup>243</sup> It is not the purpose of the exemption to protect a governmental body when it discusses general policies that do not involve identifying specific employees.<sup>244</sup> Thus, Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c) authorizes a closed session to discuss the qualifications of and salary to offer a specific applicant but does not authorize a closed session to discuss the qualifications and salary range for the position in general.<sup>245</sup> The section authorizes closure to determine increases in compensation for specific employees.<sup>246</sup> Similarly, Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c) authorizes closure to determine which employees to lay off, or whether to non-renew an employee’s contract at the expiration of the contract term,<sup>247</sup> but not to determine whether to reduce or increase staffing, in general.

- **Consideration of Financial, Medical, Social, or Personal Information**

The exemption in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(f) authorizes a closed session for:

Considering financial, medical, social or personal histories or disciplinary data of specific persons, preliminary consideration of specific personnel problems or the investigation of charges against specific persons except where par. (b) applies which, if discussed in public, would be likely to have a substantial adverse effect upon the reputation of any person referred to in such histories or data, or involved in such problems or investigations.

An example of this is where a state employee was alleged to have violated a state law.<sup>248</sup> This exemption is not limited to considerations involving public employees. For example, the Attorney General concluded that, in an exceptional case, a school board could convene in closed session under the exemption to interview a candidate to fill a vacancy on the school board if information is expected to damage a reputation, however, the vote should be in open session.<sup>249</sup>

At the same time, the Attorney General cautioned that the exemption in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(f) is extremely limited. It applies only where a member of a governmental body has actual knowledge of information that will have a substantial adverse effect on the person mentioned or involved. Moreover, the exemption authorizes closure only for the duration of the discussions about the information specified in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(f). Thus, the exemption would not authorize a school board to actually appoint a new member to the board in closed session.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> *Oshkosh Nw. Co. v. Oshkosh Libr. Bd.*, 125 Wis. 2d 480, 486, 373 N.W.2d 459 (Ct. App. 1985).

<sup>244</sup> See 80 Op. Att’y Gen. 176, 177–78 (1992); see also *Buswell*, 2007 WI 71, ¶ 37 (noting that Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(c) “provides for closed sessions for considering matters related to individual employees”).

<sup>245</sup> 80 Op. Att’y Gen. at 178–82.

<sup>246</sup> 67 Op. Att’y Gen. 117, 118.

<sup>247</sup> See 66 Op. Att’y Gen. 211, 213.

<sup>248</sup> See *Wis. State J. v. Univ. of Wis.-Platteville*, 160 Wis. 2d 31, 38, 465 N.W.2d 266 (Ct. App. 1990).

<sup>249</sup> 74 Op. Att’y Gen. 70, 72.

<sup>250</sup> *Id.*

- **Conducting Public Business with Competitive or Bargaining Implications**

A closed session is also authorized for “[d]eliberating or negotiating the purchasing of public properties, the investing of public funds, or conducting other specified public business, whenever competitive or bargaining reasons require a closed session.”<sup>251</sup> The Attorney General has determined that the exemption authorized a school board to convene in closed session to develop negotiating strategies for collective bargaining.<sup>252</sup>

Governmental officials must keep in mind, however, that this exemption applies only when “competitive or bargaining reasons require a closed session.”<sup>253</sup> The exemption is restrictive rather than expansive.<sup>254</sup> When a governmental body seeks to convene in closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(e), the burden is on the body to show that competitive or bargaining interests require closure.<sup>255</sup> An announcement of a contemplated closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(e) that provides only a conclusory assertion that the subject of the session will involve competitive or bargaining issues is inadequate because it does not reflect how the proposed discussion would implicate the competitive or bargaining interests of the body or the body’s basis for concluding that the subject falls within the exemption.<sup>256</sup>

The use of the word “require” in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(e) limits that exemption to situations in which competitive or bargaining reasons leave a governmental body with no option other than to close the meeting.<sup>257</sup> In *Citizens for Responsible Development*, the court found that a desire or request for confidentiality by a private developer engaged in negotiations with a city was not sufficient to justify a closed session for competitive or bargaining reasons.<sup>258</sup> Nor did the fear that public statements might attract the attention of potential private competitors for the developer justify closure under this exemption, because the court found that such competition would be likely to benefit, rather than harm, the city’s competitive or bargaining interests.<sup>259</sup> Similarly, holding closed meetings about ongoing negotiations between the city and private parties would not prevent those parties from seeking a better deal elsewhere. The possibility of such competition, therefore, also did not justify closure under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(e).<sup>260</sup> The exemption did, however, allow the city to close those *portions* of its meetings that would reveal its negotiation strategy or the price it planned to offer for a purchase of property, but it could not close other parts of the meetings.<sup>261</sup> The competitive or bargaining interests to be protected by a closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(e) do not have to be shared by every member of the body or by every municipality participating in an intergovernmental body.<sup>262</sup>

Consistent with the above emphasis on the word “require” in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(e), the Attorney General has advised that mere inconvenience, delay, embarrassment, frustration, or even speculation as to the probability of success would be an insufficient basis to close a meeting.<sup>263</sup> Competitive or bargaining reasons permit a closed session where the discussion will directly and substantially affect negotiations with a third party, but not where the discussions might be one of several factors that indirectly influence the

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<sup>251</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(e).

<sup>252</sup> 66 Op. Att’y Gen. 93, 96 (the opinion advised that governmental bodies that are not formed exclusively for collective bargaining comply with the open meetings law when meeting for the purpose of developing negotiating strategy).

<sup>253</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(e).

<sup>254</sup> *Citizens for Responsible Dev.*, 2007 WI App 114, ¶¶ 6–8.

<sup>255</sup> *Id.* ¶ 10.

<sup>256</sup> *Wirth/Lamoreaux Correspondence* (May 30, 2007).

<sup>257</sup> *Citizens for Responsible Dev.*, 2007 WI App 114, ¶ 14.

<sup>258</sup> *Id.* ¶¶ 13–14.

<sup>259</sup> *Id.* ¶ 14 n.6.

<sup>260</sup> *Id.* ¶¶ 15–16.

<sup>261</sup> *Id.* ¶ 19.

<sup>262</sup> *State ex rel. Herro v. Village of McFarland*, 2007 WI App 172, ¶¶ 16–19, 303 Wis. 2d 749, 737 N.W.2d 55.

<sup>263</sup> *Gempeler Correspondence* (Feb. 12, 1979).

outcome of those negotiations.<sup>264</sup> The meetings of a governmental body also may not be closed in a blanket manner merely because they may at times involve competitive or bargaining issues, but rather may only be closed on those occasions when the particular meeting is going to involve discussion which, if held in open session, would harm the competitive or bargaining interests at issue.<sup>265</sup> Once a governmental body's bargaining team has reached a tentative agreement, the discussion whether the body should ratify the agreement should be conducted in open session.<sup>266</sup>

- **Conferring with Legal Counsel with Respect to Litigation**

The exemption in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(g) authorizes a closed session for “[c]onfering with legal counsel for the governmental body who is rendering oral or written advice concerning strategy to be adopted by the body with respect to litigation in which it is or is likely to become involved.”

The presence of the governmental body's legal counsel is not, in itself, sufficient reason to authorize closure under this exemption. The exemption applies only if the legal counsel is rendering advice on strategy to adopt for litigation in which the governmental body is or is likely to become involved.

There is no clear-cut standard for determining whether a governmental body is “likely” to become involved in litigation. Members of a governmental body should rely on the body's legal counsel for advice on whether litigation is sufficiently “likely” to authorize a closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(g).

- **Remaining Exemptions**

The remaining exemptions in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) authorize closure for:

1. Considering applications for probation or parole, or considering strategy for crime detection or prevention.<sup>267</sup>
2. Specified deliberations by the state council on unemployment insurance and the state council on worker's compensation.<sup>268</sup>
3. Specified deliberations involving the location of a burial site.<sup>269</sup>
4. Consideration of requests for confidential written advice from the government accountability board or from any county or municipal ethics board.<sup>270</sup>

## **Who May Attend a Closed Session**

A frequently asked question concerns who may attend the closed session meetings of a governmental body. In general, the open meetings law gives wide discretion to a governmental body to admit into a closed session anyone whose presence the body determines is necessary for the consideration of the matter that is the subject of the meeting.<sup>271</sup> If the governmental body is a subunit of a parent body, the subunit must allow members of the parent

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<sup>264</sup> Henderson Correspondence (Mar. 24, 1992).

<sup>265</sup> I-04-09 (Sept. 28, 2009).

<sup>266</sup> 81 Op. Att'y Gen. 139, 141 (1994).

<sup>267</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(d).

<sup>268</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(ee), (eg).

<sup>269</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(em).

<sup>270</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)(h).

<sup>271</sup> Schuh Correspondence (Dec. 15, 1988).

body to attend its open session and closed session meetings, unless the rules of the parent body or subunit provide otherwise.<sup>272</sup> Where enough non-members of a subunit attend the subunit's meetings that a quorum of the parent body is present, a meeting of the parent body occurs, and the notice requirements of Wis. Stat. § 19.84 apply.<sup>273</sup>

### **Voting in an Authorized Closed Session**

The Wisconsin Supreme Court has held that Wis. Stat. § 14.90 (1959), a predecessor to the current open meetings law, authorized a governmental body to vote in closed session on matters that were the legitimate subject of deliberation in closed session.<sup>274</sup> The court reasoned that "voting is an integral part of deliberating and merely formalizes the result reached in the deliberating process."<sup>275</sup>

In *Schaeve*,<sup>276</sup> the Wisconsin Court of Appeals commented on the propriety of voting in closed session under the current open meetings law. The court indicated that a governmental body must vote in open session unless an exemption in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) expressly authorizes voting in closed session.<sup>277</sup> The court's statement was not essential to its holding and it is unclear whether the supreme court would adopt a similar interpretation of the current open meetings law.

Given this uncertainty, the Attorney General advises that a governmental body vote in open session, unless the vote is clearly an integral part of deliberations authorized to be conducted in closed session under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1). Stated another way, a governmental body should vote in open session, unless doing so would compromise the need for the closed session.<sup>278</sup>

None of the exemptions in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1) authorize a governmental body to consider the ratification or final approval of a collective bargaining agreement negotiated by or for the body in closed session.<sup>279</sup>

### **Reconvening in Open Session**

A governmental body may not commence a meeting, convene in closed session, and subsequently reconvene in open session within 12 hours after completion of a closed session, unless public notice of the subsequent open session is given "at the same time and in the same manner" as the public notice of the prior open session.<sup>280</sup> The notice need not specify the time the governmental body expects to reconvene in open session if the body plans to reconvene immediately following the closed session. If the notice does specify the time, the body must wait until that time to reconvene in open session. When a governmental body reconvenes in open session following a closed session, the presiding officer has a duty to open the door of the meeting room and inform any members of the public present that the session is open.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.89.

<sup>273</sup> *Badke*, 173 Wis. 2d at 579.

<sup>274</sup> *Cities Serv. Oil Co.*, 21 Wis. 2d at 538.

<sup>275</sup> *Id.* at 539.

<sup>276</sup> *Schaeve*, 125 Wis. 2d at 53.

<sup>277</sup> *Id.*

<sup>278</sup> *Accord Epping*, 218 Wis. 2d at 524 n.4 (even if deliberations were conducted in an unlawful closed session, a subsequent vote taken in open session could not be voided).

<sup>279</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(3); 81 Op. Att'y Gen. 139.

<sup>280</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.85(2).

<sup>281</sup> [Claybaugh Correspondence](#) (Feb. 16, 2006).

# WHO ENFORCES THE OPEN MEETINGS LAW AND WHAT ARE ITS PENALTIES?

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## Enforcement

Both the Attorney General and the district attorneys have authority to enforce the open meetings law.<sup>282</sup> In most cases, enforcement at the local level has the greatest chance of success due to the need for intensive factual investigation, the district attorneys' familiarity with the local rules of procedure, and the need to assemble witnesses and material evidence.<sup>283</sup> Under certain circumstances, the Attorney General may elect to prosecute complaints involving a matter of statewide concern.

A district attorney has authority to enforce the open meetings law only after an individual files a verified open meetings law complaint with the district attorney.<sup>284</sup> Actions to enforce the open meetings law are exempt from the notice of claim requirements of Wis. Stat. § 893.80.<sup>285</sup> The verified complaint must be signed by the individual and notarized and should include available information that will be helpful to investigators, such as: identifying the governmental body and any members thereof alleged to have violated the law; describing the factual circumstances of the alleged violations; identifying witnesses with relevant evidence; and identifying any relevant documentary evidence. The district attorney has broad discretion to determine whether a verified complaint should be prosecuted.<sup>286</sup> An enforcement action brought by a district attorney or by the Attorney General must be commenced within two years after the cause of action accrues or be barred.<sup>287</sup>

Proceedings to enforce the open meetings law are civil actions subject to the rules of civil procedure, rather than criminal procedure, and governed by the ordinary civil standard of proof, rather than a heightened standard of proof such as would apply in a criminal or quasi-criminal proceeding. Accordingly, enforcement of the open meetings law does not involve such practices as arrest, posting bond, entering criminal-type pleas, or any other aspects of criminal procedure. Rather, an open meetings law enforcement action is commenced like any civil action by filing and serving a summons and complaint. In addition, the open meetings law cannot be enforced by the issuance of a citation, in the way that other civil forfeitures are often enforced, because citation procedures are inconsistent with the statutorily-mandated verified complaint procedure.<sup>288</sup>

If the district attorney refuses to commence an open meetings law enforcement action or otherwise fails to act within 20 days of receiving a complaint, the individual who filed the complaint has a right to bring an action, in the name of the state, to enforce the open meetings law.<sup>289</sup> Although an individual may not bring a private enforcement action prior to the expiration of the district attorney's twenty-day review period, the district attorney may still commence an action even though more than 20 days have passed. It is not uncommon for the review and investigation of open meetings complaints to take longer than 20 days.

Court proceedings brought by private relators to enforce the open meetings law must be commenced prior to the expiration of the two year statute of limitation. If the action is not brought forth within two years after the cause of action accrues, the proceedings will be barred.<sup>290</sup> If a private relator brings an enforcement action and prevails, the

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<sup>282</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.97(1).

<sup>283</sup> 65 Op. Att'y Gen. Preface, ii.

<sup>284</sup> See Wis. Stat. § 19.97(1).

<sup>285</sup> *E-Z Roll Off, LLC v. Oneida County*, 2011 WI 71, ¶ 21, 335 Wis. 2d 720, 800 N.W.2d 421 (citing *State ex rel. Auchinleck v. Town of LaGrange*, 200 Wis. 2d 585, 597, 547 N.W.2d 587 (1996)).

<sup>286</sup> *State v. Karpinski*, 92 Wis. 2d 599, 607, 285 N.W.2d 729 (1979).

<sup>287</sup> See Wis. Stat. § 893.93(2)(a).

<sup>288</sup> *Zwieg Correspondence* (Mar. 10, 2005).

<sup>289</sup> *Lawton*, 2005 WI App 16, ¶ 15; Wis. Stat. § 19.97(4); see also *Fabyan v. Achtenhagen*, 2002 WI App 214, ¶¶ 10-13, 257 Wis. 2d 310, 652 N.W.2d 649 (complaint under Wis. Stat. § 19.97 must be brought in the name of and on behalf of the state; *i.e.*, the caption must bear the title "State ex rel." or the court lacks competency to proceed).

<sup>290</sup> Wis. Stat. § 893.93(2)(a); *State ex rel. Leung v. City of Lake Geneva*, 2003 WI App 129, ¶ 6, 265 Wis. 2d 674, 666 N.W.2d 104.

court is authorized to grant broad relief, including a declaration that the law was violated, civil forfeitures where appropriate, and the award of the actual and necessary costs of prosecution, including reasonable attorney fees.<sup>291</sup> Attorney fees will be awarded under this provision where such an award will provide an incentive to other private parties to similarly vindicate the public's rights to open government and will deter governmental bodies from skirting the open meetings law.<sup>292</sup>

Relief for alleged violations of the open meetings law cannot be sought under the public records law. In *Journal Times*,<sup>293</sup> the plaintiff newspaper brought a mandamus action under Wis. Stat. § 19.37(2)(a), claiming, in part, that the defendant commission, by not contemporaneously creating a record of a motion at a closed-session meeting, had violated the requirement in Wis. Stat. § 19.88(3) of the open meetings law that all motions and roll call votes must be recorded, preserved, and open to public inspection to the extent required by the public records law. The court held, in part, that the newspaper could not seek relief under the public records law for the alleged violation of the open meetings law.<sup>294</sup>

## Penalties

Any member of a governmental body who “knowingly” attends a meeting held in violation of the open meetings law, or otherwise violates the law, is subject to a forfeiture of between \$25 and \$300 for each violation.<sup>295</sup> Any forfeiture obtained in an action brought by the district attorney is awarded to the county.<sup>296</sup> Any forfeiture obtained in an action brought by the Attorney General or a private citizen is awarded to the state.<sup>297</sup>

The Wisconsin Supreme Court has defined “knowingly” as not only positive knowledge of the illegality of a meeting, but also awareness of the high probability of the meeting's illegality or conscious avoidance of awareness of the illegality.<sup>298</sup> The court also held that knowledge is not required to impose forfeitures on an individual for violating the open meetings law by means other than attending a meeting held in violation of the law. Examples of “other violations” are failing to give the required public notice of a meeting or failing to follow the procedure for closing a session.<sup>299</sup>

A member of a governmental body who is charged with knowingly attending a meeting held in violation of the law may raise one of two defenses: (1) that the member made or voted in favor of a motion to prevent the violation; or (2) that the member's votes on all relevant motions prior to the violation were inconsistent with the cause of the violation.<sup>300</sup>

A member who is charged with a violation other than knowingly attending a meeting held in violation of the law may be permitted to raise the additional statutory defense that the member did not act in his or her official capacity. In addition, in *Swanson*,<sup>301</sup> and *Hodge*,<sup>302</sup> the Wisconsin Supreme Court intimated that a member of a governmental body can avoid liability if he or she can factually prove that he or she relied, in good faith and in an open and

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<sup>291</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.97(4).

<sup>292</sup> *Buswell*, 2007 WI 71, ¶ 54.

<sup>293</sup> *J. Times*, 2015 WI 56.

<sup>294</sup> *Id.* ¶ 51.

<sup>295</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.96.

<sup>296</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.97(1).

<sup>297</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.97(1), (2), (4).

<sup>298</sup> *Swanson*, 92 Wis. 2d at 319.

<sup>299</sup> *Id.* at 321.

<sup>300</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.96.

<sup>301</sup> *Swanson*, 92 Wis. 2d at 319.

<sup>302</sup> *Hodge*, 180 Wis. 2d at 80.

unconcealed manner, on the advice of counsel whose statutory duties include the rendering of legal opinions as to the actions of the body.<sup>303</sup>

A governmental body may not reimburse a member for a forfeiture incurred as a result of a violation of the law, unless the enforcement action involved a real issue as to the constitutionality of the open meetings law.<sup>304</sup> Although it is not required to do so, a governmental body may reimburse a member for his or her reasonable attorney fees in defending against an enforcement action and for any plaintiff's attorney fees that the member is ordered to pay. The city attorney may represent city officials in open meetings law enforcement actions.<sup>305</sup>

In addition to the forfeiture penalty, Wis. Stat. § 19.97(3) provides that a court may void any action taken at a meeting held in violation of the open meetings law if the court finds that the interest in enforcing the law outweighs any interest in maintaining the validity of the action. Thus, in *Hodge*,<sup>306</sup> the court voided the town board's denial of a permit, taken after an unauthorized closed session deliberation about whether to grant or deny the permit.<sup>307</sup> A court may award any other appropriate legal or equitable relief, including declaratory and injunctive relief.<sup>308</sup>

In enforcement actions seeking forfeitures, the provisions of the open meetings law must be narrowly construed due to the penal nature of forfeiture. In all other actions, the provisions of the law must be liberally construed to ensure the public's right to "the fullest and most complete information regarding the affairs of government as is compatible with the conduct of governmental business."<sup>309</sup> Thus, it is advisable to prosecute forfeiture actions separately from actions seeking other types of relief under the open meetings law.

## Interpretation by Attorney General

In addition to the methods of enforcement discussed above, the Attorney General also has express statutory authority to respond to requests for advice from any person as to the applicability of the open meetings and public records laws.<sup>310</sup> This differs from other areas of law, in which the Attorney General is only authorized to give legal opinions or advice to specified governmental officials and agencies. Because the Legislature has expressly authorized the Attorney General to interpret the open meetings law, the Wisconsin Supreme Court has acknowledged that the Attorney General's opinions in this area should be given substantial weight.<sup>311</sup>

Citizens with questions about matters outside the scope of the open meetings and public records laws should seek assistance from a private attorney. Citizens and public officials with questions about the open meetings law or the public records law are advised to first consult the applicable statutes, the corresponding discussions in this compliance guide and in Wisconsin DOJ's Public Records Law Compliance Guide, court decisions, and prior

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<sup>303</sup> See *State v. Tereschko*, No. 00-3290, 2001 WL 537491, ¶¶ 9–10 (Wis. Ct. App. May 22, 2001) (unpublished) (declining to find a knowing violation where school board members relied on the advice of counsel in going into closed session); *State v. Davis*, 63 Wis. 2d 75, 82, 216 N.W.2d 31 (1974) (interpreting Wis. Stat. § 946.13(1) (private interest in public contract)); cf. *J./Sentinel, Inc. v. Shorewood Sch. Bd.*, 186 Wis. 2d 443, 452–55, 521 N.W.2d 165 (Ct. App. 1994) (school board may not avoid duty to provide public records by delegating the creation and custody of the record to its attorneys).

<sup>304</sup> 66 Op. Att'y Gen. 226 (1977).

<sup>305</sup> 77 Op. Att'y Gen. 177, 180 (1988).

<sup>306</sup> *Hodge*, 180 Wis. 2d at 75–76.

<sup>307</sup> Cf. *State ex rel. Ozanne v. Fitzgerald*, 2011 WI 43, ¶ 13, 334 Wis. 2d 70, 798 N.W.2d 436 (Wisconsin supreme court did not void a statute adopted by the legislature because a legislative committee did not comply with notice requirements of the open meetings law); *Epping*, 218 Wis. 2d at 524 n.4 (arguably unlawful closed session deliberation does not provide basis for voiding subsequent open session vote); *State ex rel. Ward v. Town of Nashville*, No. 00-0973, 2001 WL 881704, ¶ 30 (Wis. Ct. App. Aug. 7, 2001) (unpublished) (declining to void an agreement made in open session, where the agreement was the product of three years of unlawfully closed meetings).

<sup>308</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.97(2).

<sup>309</sup> Wis. Stat. § 19.81(1), (4).

<sup>310</sup> Wis. Stat. §§ 19.39, 19.98.

<sup>311</sup> *BDADC*, 2008 WI 90, ¶¶ 37, 44–45. See also *Krueger*, 2017 WI 70, ¶ 39 (adopting the Attorney General's opinion that, under open meetings law, a committee is created whenever a government body, by rule, "authorizes the committee and assigns the duties and functions of the committee" (quoting 78 Op. Att'y Gen. 67, 69)).



Attorney General opinions and to confer with their own private or governmental attorneys. In the rare instances where a question cannot be resolved in this manner, a written request for advice may be made to Wisconsin DOJ. In submitting such requests, it should be remembered that Wisconsin DOJ cannot conduct factual investigations, resolve disputed issues of fact, or make definitive determinations on fact-specific issues. Any response will thus be based solely on the information provided.

# Appendix A

Open Meetings Law

Wis. Stat. §§ 19.81–19.98

# Appendix B

Open Meetings Law Complaint Form–SAMPLE

VERIFIED OPEN MEETINGS LAW COMPLAINT

Now comes the complainant \_\_\_\_\_ and as and for a verified complaint pursuant to Wis. Stat. §§ 19.96 and 19.97, alleges and complains as follows:

1. That complainant is a resident of the \_\_\_\_\_ [town, village, city] of \_\_\_\_\_, Wisconsin, and that complainant's Post Office Address is \_\_\_\_\_ [street, avenue, etc.], \_\_\_\_\_ [city], Wisconsin \_\_\_\_\_ [zip].

2. That \_\_\_\_\_ [name of member or chief presiding officer] whose Post Office Address is \_\_\_\_\_ [street, avenue, etc.], \_\_\_\_\_ [city], Wisconsin \_\_\_\_\_ [zip] was on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 20\_\_\_\_, a \_\_\_\_\_ [member or chief presiding officer] of \_\_\_\_\_ [designate official title of governmental body] and that such \_\_\_\_\_ [board, council, commission or committee] is a governmental body within the meaning of Wis. Stat. § 19.82(1).

3. That \_\_\_\_\_ [name of member or chief presiding officer] on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_\_\_, at \_\_\_\_\_ County of \_\_\_\_\_, Wisconsin, knowingly attended a meeting of said governmental body held in violation of Wis. Stat. § 19.96 and \_\_\_\_\_ [cite other applicable section(s)], or otherwise violated those sections in that [set out every act or omission constituting the offense charged]: \_\_\_\_\_

4. That \_\_\_\_\_ [name of member or chief presiding officer] is thereby subject to the penalties prescribed in Wis. Stat. § 19.96.

5. That the following witnesses can testify to said acts or omissions:

Table with 3 columns: Name, Address, Telephone. Multiple rows for witness information.

6. That the following documentary evidence of said acts or omissions is available: \_\_\_\_\_

7. That this complaint is made to the District Attorney for \_\_\_\_\_ County under the provisions of Wis. Stat. § 19.97, and that the district attorney may bring an action to recover the forfeiture provided in Wis. Stat § 19.96.

