Introduction
Wisconsin Public Records Law

Wis. Stat. §§ 19.31 to 19.39
Objectives

- Shed light on workings of government and acts of public officers and employees
- Assist members of the public in becoming an informed electorate
- Serve a basic tenet of our democratic system by providing opportunity for public oversight
Public Records Request Process

- PRR received and forwarded to authority’s records custodian
- Authority begins search for records
- Any responsive records are reviewed:
  - Is there a statutory or common law exemption from disclosure?
  - Authority applies public records balancing test
- Records are released with letter explaining any redactions
Presumption

The public records law “shall be construed in every instance with a presumption of complete public access, consistent with the conduct of government business. The denial of public access generally is contrary to the public interest, and only in an exceptional case may access be denied.”

— Wis. Stat. § 19.31
Government Transparency

- “Transparency and oversight are essential to honest, ethical governance.”

Public Record Roles
“Authority”

- Defined in Wis. Stat. § 19.32(1) - any of specified entities having custody of a record
- Very similar to “governmental body” in Open Meetings law
- Includes quasi-governmental corporation
- Public records law obligations apply separately to each authority
- *Wis. Prof’l Police Ass’n v. Wis. Cntys. Ass’n*, 2014 WI App 106, 357 Wis. 2d 687 (unincorporated association is not an authority)
“Legal Custodian”

- Defined in Wis. Stat. § 19.33 - vested by an authority with full legal power to render decisions and carry out public records responsibilities

- Elective official, chairperson of a committee of elected officials, or designee
  - Includes an elected assessor
  - A contracted assessor is not the custodian

- Other authorities to designate one or more positions

- Defaults are highest ranking officer and chief administrative officer, if any
“Legal Custodian,” continued

- All records belong to the authority (e.g., municipality); the assessor is a custodian of records

- Custodial services
  - Other authority staff may participate or assist
  - Helpful to establish an internal public records procedure
“Requester”

- Defined at Wis. Stat. § 19.32(3)
  - Generally, any person who requests to inspect or copy a record
  - More limited rights for persons committed under mental health laws or incarcerated
  - Must be requesting records containing specific references to themselves or minor children
“Requester,” continued

- Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(am)

- A requester has greater rights to inspect personally identifiable information about himself or herself
Who Can Request?

- Requester need not state the purpose of the request
- Requester generally need not identify himself or herself
- Motive generally not relevant, but context appropriately considered

*State ex rel. Ardell v. Milwaukee Bd. of Sch. Dir.s.*, 2014 WI App 66, 354 Wis. 2d 471: Safety concerns may be relevant, but it is a fact-intensive issue determined on a case-by-case basis in the balancing test
Records
“Any material on which written, drawn, printed, spoken, visual or electromagnetic information or electronically generated or stored data is recorded or preserved, regardless of physical form or characteristics, which has been created or is being kept by an authority.”

— Wis. Stat. § 19.32(2)
Is it a Record?

**NO:**

- Drafts, notes, and preliminary documents
- Published material available for sale or at library
- Purely personal property
- Material with limited access rights, such as copyrights or patents
Is it a Record?

YES:

- Not created by the authority but in the authority’s possession
- Personal email, texts, calls, and documents on an authority’s accounts
- Business email, texts, calls, and documents on personal accounts
Is it a Record?

YES:

- Data in a database
- Social media
- Contractors’ records
- Police body camera and dash camera video
Personal Email, Calls, and Documents on an Authority’s Account

- Email sent and received on an authority’s computer system is a record
- Includes purely personal email sent by officers or employees of the authority
- Disclosure generally not required
- Schill v. Wis. Rapids Sch. Dist., 2010 WI 86, 327 Wis. 2d 572, 786 N.W.2d 177
Government Business Emails, Calls, and Documents on Private Accounts

- These materials may be “records”
- Content determines whether something is a “record,” not the medium, format, or location
- **Recommendation**: Conduct a careful search of all relevant accounts
- Personal materials on the same private accounts are not subject to disclosure
Electronic Records

- Content not format
- Emails
- Database files
- PowerPoint presentations
- Audio and video
- Web-based documents
- Social media
- Cell phones, including texts
Social Media

- Increased use of social media by authorities
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
- Likely to be a “record” if created or maintained by an authority
Social Media, continued

- Considerations:
  - Be familiar with the site
  - Are the records archived?
  - Who may post, manage, or control?
  - How long is content available?
  - Will third-party messages or posts be “records”? 
  - Does the authority have a social media policy?
Communications to public officials

- Persons who communicate political views to their elected lawmakers should be prepared to see their names and views made public.

- Depending on the totality of circumstances, it may be appropriate to redact personal financial, health, or other similarly sensitive information as “purely personal”.

- Possibility of threats, harassment, or reprisals is a legitimate consideration; weight to be accorded depends on likelihood of actual occurrence.

- *John K. MacIver Inst. for Public Policy, Inc. v. Erpenbach*, 2014 WI App 49, 354 Wis. 2d 61
Contractors’ Records

- Records produced or collected under a contract with the authority are “records” for public records law purposes

- Records produced or collected “in accordance with, pursuant to, in compliance with, in carrying out, subject to, or because of” a contract

- Records produced “in the course of” the contracted-for matter

- Includes data and other electronic records

- Juneau Cnty. Star-Times v. Juneau Cnty., 2013 WI 4, 345 Wis. 2d 122
Is it a Record?

The bottom line is that **content not format** determines if something is a record.
Submitting a Request
Sufficient Request

- A request need not be in writing; it may be verbal
- An authority may not require the use of a form
- “Magic words” are not required
Sufficient Request, continued

- Reasonably describes the information or records requested
- Reasonably specific as to time and subject matter
  - Important for requests involving electronic records
- Custodian should not have to guess what records the requester wants
Scope of Request

- A large number of responsive records—by itself—does not make a request too broad

- But a request cannot so burden an authority that its normal functioning would be impaired

- A requester may have no way of knowing how many responsive records exist

- A requester may have no interest in many “technically” responsive records

- Keep purpose and objective of public records law in mind
Submitting a Good Request

- Frame requests carefully to produce records actually of interest
- If requesting a particular document, identify it by date, author and title
- Search terms can be useful in requests for email records
- Direct the request to the custodian or other person identified in the authority’s public records notice
- Indicate when cost is a concern
October 3, 2016

Charlie Chairperson
Cheese Town Board Chairperson
250 Main Street
Cheese Town, WI 53000

Dear Mr. Chairperson,

Please send me copies of all town records related to redevelopment of the old quarry site.

If I do not receive the records by October 28, 2016, I will assume you are denying my open records request and will take all appropriate legal action.

I expect you will not charge me for these records because of the high public interest in this important matter.

Thank you for your prompt attention.

Yours truly,

Ralph Requester
123 Quarry Road
Cheese Town, WI 53000
October 3, 2016

Carly Clerk
Town Clerk
250 Main Street
Cheese Town, WI 53000

Dear Ms. Clerk:

Pursuant to the Wisconsin Public Records Law, please send me copies of all 2015 Cheese Town Board minutes discussing the Vacation Company's proposed redevelopment of the old Bedrock Quarry site. I only need pages of the minutes on discussing the proposed quarry redevelopment, and I don't need copies of any related documents distributed at the Town Board meetings. Also, please send me copies of all emails between the Town Board members regarding the quarry redevelopment from May 1 through September 15, 2015. I would prefer to receive the responsive records by email, if possible.

If the cost of fulfilling my request will be more than $25.00, please contact me before proceeding. Also, please contact me if you have any questions about this request.

Thank you,

Rebecca Requester
rebeccaim.net.com
555-1234
Processing a Request
Evaluating a Request

- Carefully assess to determine what is needed to respond
- Don’t understand the request?
  - Contact the requester
    - Send a written summary of your understanding
    - Request clarification
Evaluating a Request, continued

- Inform the requester about a large number of responsive records, or large estimated costs, and suggest/solicit alternatives

- Send the requester an acknowledgment and periodic status updates if the response will take some time
Four Steps

1. Does a responsive record exist?

2. Is there an absolute right of access?

3. Is access absolutely denied?

4. Apply the balancing test
Step 1 – Does the Record Exist?

- Generally, only records that exist at the time of the request must be produced
  - To respond, an authority need not create new records
- Public records law does not require answering questions
  - However, if a request asks a question and an existing record answers the question, provide the record or inform the requester
- Continuing requests are not contemplated by the public records law
Step 1, continued

- Search for records that might be responsive
- If there are no responsive records, inform the requester
- *Journal Times v. Police & Fire Com’rs Bd.*, 2015 WI 56, 362 Wis. 2d 577, 866 N.W.2d 563: It is problematic to deny access to records on substantive grounds, then respond later that there are no responsive records
Step 2 – Absolute Right of Access

- **Absolute Right** - Not many exist:
  - Books and papers “required to be kept” by sheriff, clerk of circuit court, and other specified county officials
  - Daily arrest logs or police “blotters” at police departments
Step 3 – Absolute Denial of Access

- **Absolute Denial**

  - Can be located in public records statutes:
    - Information related to a current investigation of possible employee criminal conduct or misconduct
    - Plans or specifications for state buildings
  - Can be located in other statutes or case law:
    - Patient health care records; pupil records
Step 4 - The Balancing Test

- Weigh the public interest in disclosure of the record against the public interest and public policies against disclosure

- Fact intensive; “blanket rules” disfavored

- Must conduct on case-by-case basis taking into consideration the totality of circumstances

- Identity of the requester and the purpose of the request are generally not part of the balancing test
Some Sources of Public Policies

- Policies expressed in other statutes
  - E.g., patient health care records, student records
- Court decisions
- Exemptions to open meetings requirements in Wis. Stat. § 19.85(1)
  - Only if there is a specific demonstration of need to deny access at the time of the request
- Policies expressed in evidentiary privileges
- Public interest in protecting privacy of individuals
Law Enforcement Considerations

- Presumption of complete public access – public’s right to know
- Crime victim rights expressed in statutes, constitutional provisions, and case law
  - Consideration of family of crime victims
- Protection of witnesses
  - Safety and security
  - “Chilling” future cooperation with law enforcement
- Children and juveniles
Redaction
Redaction

- If part of a record is disclosable, that part must be disclosed
  - Wis. Stat. § 19.36(6)

- Non-disclosable portions must be redacted

- No specific way to redact: electronic redaction, black magic marker, cover up with white paper when photocopying
Redaction constitutes a denial of access to the redacted information

Therefore subject to review by mandamus

Effective July 1, 2016, certain personally identifiable and financial information required to be redacted from records filed with Wisconsin’s circuit courts

See Wis. Stat. §§ 801.19, 801.20, 801.21
Redaction – Audio and Video

- Audio – accompanying video, dispatch recordings, etc.
  - Digital editing equipment
  - Partial redaction
- Video – security video, police body and dashboard cameras, etc.
  - Video blurring
  - Blacking out portions of video
- Technology
- Cost
Special Issues
Special Issues

- A prosecutor’s files are not subject to public inspection under the public records law. *State ex rel. Richards v. Foust*, 165 Wis. 2d 429, 433-34, 477 N.W.2d 608, 610 (1991).

- Law enforcement records: balancing test must be applied on a case-by-case basis

- Wis. Stat. § 19.36(8): Information identifying confidential informants must be withheld unless balancing test requires otherwise
Special Issues, continued

- Records related to children or juveniles:
  - Wis. Stat. ch. 48: Law enforcement records of children who are the subjects of such investigations or other proceedings are confidential with some exceptions. See Wis. Stat. § 48.396.
  - Wis. Stat. ch. 938: Law enforcement records of juveniles who are the subjects of such investigations or other proceedings are confidential with some exceptions. See Wis. Stat. § 938.396.
  - Access to other records regarding or mentioning children subject to general public records rules.
Driver’s Privacy Protection Act (DPPA)

- Federal statute enacted in 1994
- Purpose: limit release of an individual’s personal information contained in driver’s license record
- Concerns about threats from stalkers, criminals and states’ practice of selling personal information to businesses
DPPA, continued

- Wisconsin Public Records Law and DPPA
  - Newspaper requested two accident reports and two incident reports from the City of New Richmond PD
  - PD provided redacted reports based on DPPA
  - Newspaper sued City of New Richmond alleging violation of public records law
DPPA, continued

- **Accident reports**: permitted to be released unredacted

- **Incident reports**: release of DMV information prohibited unless DPPA exception applies
  - Compliance with public records request not a “function”

- Information **verified** using DMV records is not protected by DPPA
  - Presents problem of determining how information was obtained
Final Candidates – § 19.36(7)

Each applicant who is seriously considered for appointment or whose name is certified for appointment, and whose name is submitted for final consideration to an authority for appointment, to a state position (except in the classified service) or a local public office

Includes all of the following:

- When there are at least 5 applicants, each of the 5 applicants considered most qualified
- When there are fewer than 5 applicants, each applicant
- When an appointment is to be made from a group of more than 5 most qualified applicants, all applicants in the group
Direct access to electronic databases not required

Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(k): reasonable restrictions on manner of access to original record if irreplaceable or easily damaged

Wis. Stat. § 19.36(4): a computer program is not subject to examination or copying

However, the following is:

Input: Material used as input for computer program

Output: Material produced as product of computer program

Requester, within reasonable limits, may request a data run to obtain requested information
Metadata

- No controlling Wisconsin precedent
  - A circuit court held metadata is not a record because it includes drafts, notes, preliminary computations, and editing information
  - Courts in other jurisdictions have held metadata must be disclosed in response to freedom of information laws
- Good rule of thumb: content determines whether it is a record, not the format
Responding to a Request
Format of Records

- Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(b), (c), (d): a copy substantially as readable/audible/good as the original

- *Wiredata, Inc. v. Village of Sussex*, 2008 WI 69, 310 Wis. 2d 397, 751 N.W.2d 736 (*Wiredata II*)
  - Whether records must be produced in requested format not squarely addressed
  - PDF fulfilled request for “electronic records” despite not having all the characteristics wanted by the requester
  - Sufficient to provide a copy of relevant data in an appropriate format

- Right to receive land information from a political subdivision in same format in which record is maintained
A written request requires a written response, if the request is denied in whole or in part.

May respond in writing to a verbal request.

A request for clarification, without more, is not a denial.

Must inform requestor that denial is subject to review in an enforcement action for mandamus under Wis. Stat. § 19.37(1) or by application to district attorney or Attorney General.
Reasons for Denial

- Reasons for denial must be specific and sufficient
- Purpose is to give adequate notice of reasons for denial and ensure that custodian has exercised judgment
- Reviewing court usually limited to reasons stated in denial
- Availability of same records from other sources generally not a sufficient reason
Ms. Rebecca Requester  
321 Quarry Road  
Cheese Town, WI 53000  

Dear Mr. Requester:

Enclosed are the records you requested. Confidential information has been redacted.

The cost of this response is $130. Please send a check in that amount to me at the address above by the end of January.

Thank you,

Carly Clerk  
Town Clerk
Dear Ms. Requester:

Attached are the records responsive to your October 3, 2016 public records request. I redacted home email addresses and home telephone numbers of the Town Board members pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 19.36(11). I also redacted purely personal information about sports activities of Town Board members' children from a few emails pursuant to the Wis. Stat. § 19.35(1)(a) balancing test. In applying the balancing test, I concluded that any public interest in the disclosure of this purely personal information is outweighed by public policies recognizing the privacy interests of local public officials and their families in matters unrelated to the conduct of government business. See Schill v. Wisconsin Rapids School District, 2010 WI 86, ¶ 9 & n. 4 (Abrahamson, C.J., lead op.); id., ¶ 148 & n. 2 (Bradley, J., concurring); id., ¶ 173 & n. 4 (Gableman, J., concurring), 327 Wis. 2d 572, 786 N.W.2d 177.

Locating the responsive records required 3 hours of staff time at $20.00 per hour, for a total of $60.00. Wis. Stat. § 19.35(3)(c). Please remit your payment within 30 days to Town Clerk, 250 Main St., Cheese Town, WI 53000.

Pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 19.35(4)(b), this determination is subject to review by mandamus under Wis. Stat. § 19.37(1) or upon application to a district attorney or the Attorney General.

Please contact me if you have any questions.

Thank you,

Carly Clerk
Cheese Town Clerk
Timing of Response

- Response is required, “as soon as practicable and without delay”
- **No specific time limits**, depends on circumstances
- DOJ policy: 10 business days generally reasonable for response to simple, narrow requests
- May be prudent to send an acknowledgement
- Penalties for arbitrary and capricious delay
Notice Before Release

- Required by Wis. Stat. § 19.356(2)(a)1
  - Records information resulting from closed investigation into a disciplinary matter or possible employment-related violation of policy, rule, or statute
- Records obtained by subpoena or search warrant
- Records prepared by an employer other than the authority about employees of that employer
- “Record subject” can try to stop disclosure in court
- Required by Wis. Stat. § 19.356(9)–officer or employee holding state or local public office
  - OAG-07-14 (October 15, 2014)
- Courtesy notice
Costs
Costs

- Actual, necessary, and direct costs only—unless otherwise specified by law

- Copying and reproduction
  - Paper copies v. electronic copies

- Location, if costs are $50.00 or more

- Mailing/shipping to requester

- Others specified in Wis. Stat. § 19.35(3)
Permissible Charges

- Authorities **may not** charge for redaction costs
- Prepayment may be required if total costs exceed $5.00
- Authority may choose to provide records for free or reduced charge
Cost of Response

- Clarifying or limiting a request may:
  - Reduce costs to requester
  - Eliminate records not of interest to requester
  - Facilitate a quicker response

- Cost estimates should be reasonable, based on information available before preparing the response or developed during preparation

- Keep careful records in order to support and calculate requests for payment of costs
Enforcement
Enforcement

- Wis. Stat. § 19.37
- Mandamus action to challenge:
  - Withholding a record or part of a record
  - Delay in granting access to record or part of record
Remedies

- Authority may be ordered to release records
- Attorney’s fees and costs may be awarded if mandamus action was a cause of the release
- If a denial, delay or charge of excessive fees is found to be arbitrary and capricious:
  - Court may award punitive damages
  - Authority may be required to forfeit not more than $1,000
    - Forfeitures enforced by action on behalf of state by the attorney general or district attorney
Other Statutes

- Wis. Stat. § 946.72: Tampering with public records and notices
  “Whoever with intent to injure or defraud destroys, damages, removes or conceals any public record is guilty of a Class H felony.”
Record Retention
Wis. Stat. § 19.35(5) - after receiving a request:

- No destruction until request granted or until at least 60 days after request is denied
- 90 days if requester is committed or incarcerated
- No destruction during enforcement action
Record Retention – Other Statutes

- Records retention laws
  - State authorities: Wis. Stat. § 16.61
  - Local authorities: Wis. Stat. § 19.21
- Record Retention Schedules (RDAs)
  - Check for existing RDAs
- http://publicrecordsboard.wi.gov/
- Consult legal counsel
Hard copies v. electronic copies

Copies of records in electronic formats permissible

State authorities: Wis. Stat. § 16.61(5)(a)

Local authorities: Wis. Stat. § 19.21(4)(c)

Local government unit or agency may provide for retention of records in electronic format

Local government unit or agency shall make for such provision by ordinance or resolution.
Record Retention Considerations

- Emails and social media
- Cell phones
  - Data, texts, other messages, photographs
- Storage, archiving, searching
  - Costs, equipment, maintenance
Further Information

- Consult legal counsel

- Download DOJ Compliance Guides and other resources at https://www.doj.state.wi.us/office-open-government/office-open-government

- Call the Office of Open Government: (608) 267-2220

- Write to: Office of Open Government
  Department of Justice
  P.O. Box 7857
  Madison, WI 53707-7857
THE WISCONSIN
PUBLIC RECORDS LAW

Wisconsin Department of Justice
Office of the Attorney General
Office of Open Government

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