



SONDY POPE

STATE REPRESENTATIVE
80TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT



Rep. Pope Column: Corrupt Politics Dealt Another Win in State Budget
Republican legislators on Joint Finance Committee voted unanimously to strike public records access

When I first heard about changes to public records access in the state budget, I was speechless.

Legislators have surely added a number of shocking proposals to this budget – slashing funding to higher education, demolishing our state’s tradition of a strong K-12 education, putting state transportation funding on a credit card – but the removal of Wisconsin’s open records law is by far the most egregious piece of the budget bill. This move is extremely cowardly, and its implications for our state’s political future are far greater than anything involving money.

Open records law has been in place since 1981, and has often caught legislators in activities such as engaging in campaign work on state time, colluding with lobbyists on legislation, or engaging in any other illegal communications as part of their official activities.

On Thursday, Republicans on the Joint Committee on Finance voted unanimously to repeal open records law, allowing legislators the “privilege” to withhold information about their office’s communications from public scrutiny.

In the past year, open records law allowed journalists to find evidence of collusion between government officials and mining company Gogebic Taconite, indicating the Gogebic practically wrote a piece of mining legislation to loosen environmental restrictions – which would benefit their company.

In my opinion, the most important part of open records law stops officials from engaging in campaign work on state time. That includes sending campaign communications, soliciting donations, and coordinating in any way with outside groups while on the taxpayer’s dime.

As we know, members of Governor Walker’s administration as well as his county executive staff were in hot water earlier this year for breaking the law by doing campaign work on state time. Some of these employees were convicted and sent to prison through the use of open records law. With Governor Walker’s presidential run looming, it looks like his supporters are willing and eager to get this pesky transparency law out of their way. A repeal of open records law really is a gift to Walker’s and any other corrupt politicians’ campaigns.



SONDY POPE

STATE REPRESENTATIVE
80TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT



Repealing open records law would give legislators the added privilege to withhold information from the public even if they are sued, and legally stop their current and former staff from releasing the information as well.

All in all, this measure opens the door for corrupt politics in our state. No longer will government officials have to be held accountable to the public. They can do whatever they want under the cover of an official title.

This move should shock anyone concerned about elected officials abusing their power.

This law applies to all communications after July 1, 2015 – last Wednesday, before the Joint Finance Committee even met. If this is signed into law with the passing of the budget next week, open records requests filed today would not have to be fulfilled.

Someone is hiding something. I implore Republicans to prove that their constituents – not the lobby groups that pay for their campaigns – asked for this legislation. The only reasons one could assume Republican legislators want this measure is because they have something to hide, or they intend to engage in activities they want to hide.

All partisanship aside, we should all be able to agree that our constituents have the right to know if we're doing the job they entrusted us to do. Holding an elected position shouldn't be about raking in profits from outside donors, giving favors to cronies, or engaging in shady backroom deals. We have an obligation to be open and honest with our constituents, to let them know who they're voting for, and to let them remove us from office if we aren't doing our jobs.

Republicans in the legislature have done enough to harm our state. Don't let them eliminate the only tool you have to keep them in line.

###