

SUBCHAPTER V

OPEN MEETINGS OF GOVERNMENTAL BODIES

**19.81 Declaration of policy.** (1) 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.

(2) To implement and ensure the public policy herein expressed, 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.

(3) In conformance with article IV, section 10, of the constitution, which states that the doors of each house shall remain open, except when the public welfare requires secrecy, it is declared to be the intent of the legislature to comply to the fullest extent with this subchapter.

(4) This subchapter shall be liberally construed to achieve the purposes set forth in this section, and the rule that penal statutes must be strictly construed shall be limited to the enforcement of

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forfeitures and shall not otherwise apply to actions brought under this subchapter or to interpretations thereof.

**History:** 1975 c. 426; 1983 a. 192.

**NOTE:** The following annotations relate to s. 66.77, repealed by Chapter 426, laws of 1975.

Subsequent to the presentation of evidence by the taxpayer, a board of review's consideration of testimony by the village assessor at an executive session was contrary to the open meeting law. Although it was permissible for the board to convene a closed session for the purpose of deliberating after a quasi-judicial hearing, the proceedings did not constitute mere deliberations but were a continuation of the quasi-judicial hearing without the presence of or notice to the objecting taxpayer. *Dolphin v. Butler Board of Review*, 70 Wis. 2d 403, 234 N.W.2d 277 (1975).

The open meeting law is not applicable to the judicial commission. *State ex rel. Lynch v. Dancy*, 71 Wis. 2d 287, 238 N.W.2d 81 (1976).

A regular open meeting, held subsequent to a closed meeting on another subject, does not constitute a reconvened open meeting when there was no prior open meeting on that day. 58 Atty. Gen. 41.

Consideration of a resolution is a formal action of an administrative or minor governing body and when taken in proper closed session, the resolution and result of the vote must be made available for public inspection, pursuant to 19.21, absent a specific showing that the public interest would be adversely affected. 60 Atty. Gen. 9.

Joint apprenticeship committees, appointed pursuant to Wis. Adm. Code provisions, are governmental bodies and subject to the requirements of the open meeting law. 63 Atty. Gen. 363.

Voting procedures employed by worker's compensation and unemployment advisory councils that utilized adjournment of public meeting for purposes of having members representing employers and members representing employees or workers to separately meet in closed caucuses and to vote as a block on reconvening was contrary to the open records law. 63 Atty. Gen. 414.

A governmental body can call closed sessions for proper purposes without giving notice to members of the news media who have filed written requests. 63 Atty. Gen. 470.

The meaning of "communication" is discussed with reference to giving the public and news media members adequate notice. 63 Atty. Gen. 509.

The posting in the governor's office of agenda of future investment board meetings is not sufficient communication to the public or the news media who have filed a written request for notice. 63 Atty. Gen. 549.

A county board may not utilize an unidentified paper ballot in voting to appoint a county highway commissioner, but may vote by ayes and nays or show of hands at an open session if some member does not require the vote to be taken in such manner that the vote of each member may be ascertained and recorded. 63 Atty. Gen. 569.

**NOTE:** The following annotations refer to ss. 19.81 to 19.98.

When the city of Milwaukee and a private non-profit festival organization incorporated the open meetings law into a contract, the contract allowed public enforcement of the contractual provisions concerning open meetings. *Journal/Sentinel, Inc. v. Pleva*, 155 Wis. 2d 704, 456 N.W.2d 359 (1990).

Sub. (2) requires that a meeting be held in a facility that gives reasonable public access, not total access. No person may be systematically excluded or arbitrarily refused admittance. *State ex rel. Badke v. Greendale Village Bd.* 173 Wis. 2d 553, 494 N.W.2d 408 (1993).

This subchapter is discussed. 65 Atty. Gen. preface.

Public notice requirements for meetings of a city district school board under this subchapter and s. 120.48, 1983 stats., are discussed. 66 Atty. Gen. 93.

A volunteer fire department organized as a nonprofit corporation under s. 213.05 is not subject to the open meeting law. 66 Atty. Gen. 113.

Anyone has the right to tape-record an open meeting of a governmental body provided the meeting is not thereby physically disrupted. 66 Atty. Gen. 318.

The open meeting law does not apply to a coroner's inquest. 67 Atty. Gen. 250.

The open meeting law does not apply if the common council hears a grievance under a collective bargaining agreement. 67 Atty. Gen. 276.

The application of the open meeting law to the duties of WERC is discussed. 68 Atty. Gen. 171.

A senate committee meeting was probably held in violation of the open meetings law although there was never any intention prior to the gathering to attempt to debate any matter of policy, to reach agreement on differences, to make any decisions on any bill or part thereof, to take any votes, or to resolve substantive differences. Quorum gatherings should be presumed to be in violation of the law, due to a quorum's ability to thereafter call, compose and control by vote a formal meeting of a governmental body. 71 Atty. Gen. 63.

Nonstock corporations created by statute as bodies politic clearly fall within the term "governmental body" as defined in the open meetings law and are subject to the provisions of the open meetings law. Nonstock corporations that were not created by the legislature or by rule, but were created by private citizens are not bodies politic and not governmental bodies. 73 Atty. Gen. 53.

A "quasi-governmental corporation" in sub. (1) includes private corporations that closely resemble governmental corporations in function, effect, or status. 80 Atty. Gen. 129.

Understanding Wisconsin's open meeting law. Harvey, WBB September 1980.

## 19.82 Definitions. As used in this subchapter:

(1) "Governmental body" means a state or local agency, board, commission, committee, 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 body

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

(2) "Meeting" means the 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, any gathering of the members of a town board for the purpose specified in s. 60.50 (6), any gathering of the commissioners of a town sanitary district for the purpose specified in s. 60.77 (5) (k), or any gathering of the members of a drainage board created under s. 88.16, 1991 stats., or under s. 88.17, for a purpose specified in s. 88.065 (5) (a).

(3) "Open session" means a meeting which is held in a place reasonably accessible to members of the public and open to all citizens at all times. In the case of a state governmental body, it means a meeting which is held in a building and room thereof which enables access by persons with functional limitations, as defined in s. 101.13 (1).

**History:** 1975 c. 426; 1977 c. 364, 447; 1985 a. 26, 29, 332; 1987 a. 305; 1993 a. 215, 263, 456, 491; 1995 a. 27, 185; 1997 a. 79; 1999 a. 9; 2007 a. 20, 96.

A "meeting" under sub. (2) was found although the governmental body was not empowered to exercise the final powers of its parent body. *State v. Swanson*, 92 Wis. 2d 310, 284 N.W.2d 655 (1979).

A "meeting" under sub. (2) was found when members met with a purpose to engage in government business and the number of members present was sufficient to determine the parent body's course of action regarding the proposal discussed. *State ex rel. Newspapers v. Showers*, 135 Wis. 2d 77, 398 N.W.2d 154 (1987).

The open meetings law is not meant to apply to single-member governmental bodies. Sub. (2) speaks of a meeting of the members, plural, implying there must be at least two members of a governmental body. *Flourde v. Berends*, 2006 WI App 147, 294 Wis. 2d 746, 720 N.W.2d 130, 05-2106.

A corporation is a quasi-governmental if, based on the totality of circumstances, it resembles a governmental corporation in function, effect, or status, requiring a case-by-case analysis. Here, a primary consideration was that the body is a funded exclusively by public tax dollars or interest thereon. Additionally, its office was located in the municipal building, it was listed on the city website, the city provided it with clerical support and office supplies, all its assets revert to the city if it ceases to exist, its books are open for city inspection, the mayor and another city official are directors, and it had no clients other than the city. *State v. Beaver Dam Area Development Corporation*, 2008 WI 90, \_\_\_ Wis. 2d \_\_\_, \_\_\_ N.W.2d \_\_\_, 06-0662.

A municipal public utility commission managing a city owned public electric utility is a governmental body under sub. (1). 65 Atty. Gen. 243.

A "private conference" under s. 118.22 (3), on nonrenewal of a teacher's contract is a "meeting" within s. 19.82 (2). 66 Atty. Gen. 211.

A private home may qualify as a meeting place under sub. (3). 67 Atty. Gen. 125.

A telephone conference call involving members of governmental body is a "meeting" that must be reasonably accessible to the public and public notice must be given. 69 Atty. Gen. 143.

**19.83 Meetings of governmental bodies.** (1) Every meeting of a governmental body shall be preceded by public notice as provided in s. 19.84, and shall be held in open session. At any meeting of a governmental body, all discussion shall be held and all action of any kind, formal or informal, shall be initiated, deliberated upon and acted upon only in open session except as provided in s. 19.85.

(2) During a period of public comment under s. 19.84 (2), a governmental body may discuss any matter raised by the public.

**History:** 1975 c. 426; 1997 a. 123.

When a quorum of a governmental body attends the meeting of another governmental body when any one of the members is not also a member of the second body, the gathering is a "meeting," unless the gathering is social or by chance. *State ex rel. Badke v. Greendale Village Board*, 173 Wis. 2d 553, 494 N.W.2d 408 (1993).

**19.84 Public notice.** (1) Public notice of all meetings of a governmental body shall be given in the following manner:

(a) As required by any other statutes; and

(b) By communication from the chief presiding officer of a governmental body or such person's designee to the public, to those news media who have filed a written request for such notice, and to the official newspaper designated under ss. 985.04, 985.05 and 985.06 or, if none exists, to a news medium likely to give notice in the area.

(2) Every public notice of a meeting of a governmental body shall set forth 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. The public notice of a meeting of a governmental body may provide for a period of public comment, during which the body may receive information from members of the public.

(3) Public notice of every meeting of a governmental body shall be given at least 24 hours prior to the commencement of such meeting unless for good cause such notice is impossible or impractical, in which case shorter notice may be given, but in no case may the notice be provided less than 2 hours in advance of the meeting.

(4) Separate public notice shall be given for each meeting of a governmental body at a time and date reasonably proximate to the time and date of the meeting.

(5) Departments and their subunits in any University of Wisconsin System institution or campus are exempt from the requirements of subs. (1) to (4) but shall provide meeting notice which is reasonably likely to apprise interested persons, and news media who have filed written requests for such notice.

(6) Notwithstanding the requirements of s. 19.83 and the requirements of this section, a governmental body which is a formally constituted subunit of a parent governmental body may conduct a meeting without public notice as required by this section during a lawful meeting of the parent governmental body, during a recess in such meeting or immediately after such meeting for the purpose of discussing or acting upon a matter which was the subject of that meeting of the parent governmental body. The presiding officer of the parent governmental body shall publicly announce the time, place and subject matter of the meeting of the subunit in advance at the meeting of the parent body.

**History:** 1975 c. 426; 1987 a. 305; 1993 a. 215; 1997 a. 123; 2007 a. 20.

There is no requirement in this section that the notice provided be exactly correct in every detail. *State ex rel. Olson v. City of Baraboo Joint Review Board*, 2002 WI App 64, 252 Wis. 2d 628, 643 N.W.2d 796, 01-0201.

Sub. (2) does not expressly require that the notice indicate whether a meeting will be purely deliberative or if action will be taken. The notice must alert the public of the importance of the meeting. Although a failure to expressly state whether action will be taken could be a violation, the importance of knowing whether a vote would be taken is diminished when no input from the audience is allowed or required. *State ex rel. Olson v. City of Baraboo Joint Review Board*, 2002 WI App 64, 252 Wis. 2d 628, 643 N.W.2d 796, 01-0201.

Sub. (2) sets forth a reasonableness standard for determining whether notice of a meeting is sufficient that strikes the proper balance between the public's right to information and the government's need to efficiently conduct its business. The standard requires taking into account the circumstances of the case, which includes analyzing such factors as the burden of providing more detailed notice, whether the subject is of particular public interest, and whether it involves non-routine action that the public would be unlikely to anticipate. *Buswell v. Tomah Area School District*, 2007 WI 71, 301 Wis. 2d 178, 732 N.W.2d 804, 05-2998.

Under sub. (1) (b), a written request for notice of meetings of a governmental body should be filed with the chief presiding officer or designee and a separate written request should be filed with each specific governmental body. 65 Atty. Gen. 166.

The method of giving notice pursuant to sub. (1) is discussed. 65 Atty. Gen. 250.

The specificity of notice required by a governmental body is discussed. 66 Atty. Gen. 143, 195.

The requirements of notice given to newspapers under this section is discussed. 66 Atty. Gen. 230.

A town board, but not an annual town meeting, is a "governmental body" within the meaning of the open meetings law. 66 Atty. Gen. 237.

News media who have filed written requests for notices of public meetings cannot be charged fees by governmental bodies for communication of the notices. 77 Atty. Gen. 312.

A newspaper is not obligated to print a notice received under sub. (1) (b), nor is governmental body obligated to pay for publication. *Martin v. Wray*, 473 F. Supp. 1131 (1979).

**19.85 Exemptions.** (1) Any meeting of a governmental body, upon motion duly made and carried, may be convened in closed session under one or more of the exemptions provided in this section. The motion shall be carried by a majority vote in such manner that the vote of each member is ascertained and recorded in the minutes. No motion to convene in closed session may be adopted unless the chief presiding officer announces to those present at the meeting at which such motion is made, the nature of the business to be considered at such closed session, and the specific exemption or exemptions under this subsection by which such

closed session is claimed to be authorized. Such announcement shall become part of the record of the meeting. No business may be taken up at any closed session except that which relates to matters contained in the chief presiding officer's announcement of the closed session. A closed session may be held for any of the following purposes:

(a) Deliberating concerning a case which was the subject of any judicial or quasi-judicial trial or hearing before that governmental body.

(b) 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; provided that the faculty member or other public employee or person licensed is given actual notice of any evidentiary hearing which may be held prior to final action being taken and of any meeting at which final action may be taken. The notice shall contain a statement that the person has the right to demand that the evidentiary hearing or meeting be held in open session. This paragraph and par. (f) do not apply to any such evidentiary hearing or meeting where the employee or person licensed requests that an open session be held.

(c) Considering employment, promotion, compensation or performance evaluation data of any public employee over which the governmental body has jurisdiction or exercises responsibility.

(d) Except as provided in s. 304.06 (1) (eg) and by rule promulgated under s. 304.06 (1) (em), considering specific applications of probation, extended supervision or parole, or considering strategy for crime detection or prevention.

(e) Deliberating 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.

(ee) Deliberating by the council on unemployment insurance in a meeting at which all employer members of the council or all employee members of the council are excluded.

(eg) Deliberating by the council on worker's compensation in a meeting at which all employer members of the council or all employee members of the council are excluded.

(em) Deliberating under s. 157.70 if the location of a burial site, as defined in s. 157.70 (1) (b), is a subject of the deliberation and if discussing the location in public would be likely to result in disturbance of the burial site.

(f) 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.

(g) Conferring 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.

(h) Consideration of requests for confidential written advice from the government accountability board under s. 5.05 (6a), or from any county or municipal ethics board under s. 19.59 (5).

(i) Considering any and all matters related to acts by businesses under s. 560.15 which, if discussed in public, could adversely affect the business, its employees or former employees.

(2) No governmental body may commence a meeting, subsequently convene in closed session and thereafter reconvene again in open session within 12 hours after completion of the closed session, unless public notice of such subsequent open session was given at the same time and in the same manner as the public notice of the meeting convened prior to the closed session.

(3) Nothing in this subchapter shall be construed to authorize a governmental body to consider at a meeting in closed session the

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final ratification or approval of a collective bargaining agreement under subch. I, IV or V of ch. 111 which has been negotiated by such body or on its behalf.

**History:** 1975 c. 426; 1977 c. 260; 1983 a. 84; 1985 a. 316; 1987 a. 38, 305; 1989 a. 64; 1991 a. 39; 1992 a. 27, 215; 1995 a. 27; 1997 a. 39, 237, 283; 1999 a. 32; 2007 a. 1, 20.

Although a meeting was properly closed, in order to refuse inspection of records of the meeting, the custodian was required by s. 19.35 (1) (a) to state specific and sufficient public policy reasons why the public interest in nondisclosure outweighed the public's right of inspection. *Oshkosh Northwestern Co. v. Oshkosh Library Board*, 125 Wis. 2d 480, 373 N.W.2d 459 (Ct. App. 1985).

The balance between protection of reputation under sub. (1) (f) and the public interest in openness is discussed. *Wis. State Journal v. UW-Platteville*, 160 Wis. 2d 31, 465 N.W.2d 266 (Ct. App. 1990). See also *Pangman v. Stigler*, 161 Wis. 2d 828, 468 N.W.2d 784 (Ct. App. 1991).

A "case" under sub. (1) (a) contemplates an adversarial proceeding. It does not connote the mere application for and granting of a permit. *Hodge v. Turtle Lake*, 180 Wis. 2d 62, 508 N.W.2d 603 (1993).

A closed session to discuss an employee's dismissal was properly held under sub. (1) (b) and did not require notice to the employee under sub. (1) (c) when no evidentiary hearing or final action took place in the closed session. *State ex rel. Epping v. City of Neillsville*, 218 Wis. 2d 516, 581 N.W.2d 548 (Ct. App. 1998), 97-0403.

The exception under sub. (1) (c) must be strictly construed. A private entity's desire for confidentiality does not permit a closed meeting. A governing body's belief that secret meetings will produce cost savings does not justify closing the door to public scrutiny. Providing contingencies allowing for future public input was insufficient. Because legitimate concerns were present for portions of the meetings does not mean the entirety of the meetings fell within the narrow exception under sub. (1) (c). *Citizens for Responsible Development v. City of Milton*, 2007 WI App 114, 300 Wis. 2d 649, 731 N.W.2d 640, 06-0427.

Section 19.35 (1) (a) does not mandate that, when a meeting is closed under this section, all records created for or presented at the meeting are exempt from disclosure. The court must still apply the balancing test articulated in *Linzmeier*, 2002 WI 84, 254 Wis. 2d 306. *Zellner v. Cedarburg School District*, 2007 WI 53, 360 Wis. 2d 290, 731 N.W.2d 240, 06-1143.

Nothing in sub. (1) (c) suggests that a reason for going into closed session must be shared by each municipality participating in an intergovernmental body. It is not inconsistent with the open meetings law for a body to move into closed session under sub. (1) (c) when the bargaining position to be protected is not shared by every member of the body. Once a vote passes to go into closed session, the reason for requesting the vote becomes the reason of the entire body. *Herro v. Village of McFarland*, 2007 WI App 172, 303 Wis. 2d 749, 737 N.W.2d 55, 06-1929.

In allowing governmental bodies to conduct closed sessions in limited circumstances, this section does not create a blanket privilege shielding closed session contents from discovery. There is no implicit or explicit confidentiality mandate. A closed meeting is not synonymous with a meeting that, by definition, entails a privilege exempting its contents from discovery. *Sands v. The Whitnall School District*, 2008 WI 89, \_\_\_ Wis. 2d \_\_\_, \_\_\_ N.W.2d \_\_\_, 05-1026.

Boards of review cannot rely on the exemptions in sub. (1) to close any meeting in view of the explicit requirements in s. 70.47 (2m). 65 Atty. Gen. 162.

A university subunit may discuss promotions not relating to tenure, merit increases, and property purchase recommendations in closed session. 66 Atty. Gen. 60.

Neither sub. (1) (c) nor (f) authorizes a school board to make actual appointments of a new member in closed session. 74 Atty. Gen. 70.

A county board chairperson and committee are not authorized by sub. (1) (c) to meet in closed session to discuss appointments to county board committees. In appropriate circumstances, sub. (1) (f) would authorize closed sessions. 76 Atty. Gen. 276.

Sub. (1) (c) does not permit closed sessions to consider employment, compensation, promotion, or performance evaluation policies to be applied to a position of employment in general. 80 Atty. Gen. 176.

A governmental body may convene in closed session to formulate collective bargaining strategy, but sub. (3) requires that deliberations leading to ratification of a tentative agreement with a bargaining unit, as well as the ratification vote, must be held in open session. 81 Atty. Gen. 139.

"Evidentiary hearing" as used in s. 19.85 (1) (b), means a formal examination of accusations by receiving testimony or other forms of evidence that may be relevant to the dismissal, demotion, licensing, or discipline of any public employee or person covered by that section. A council that considered a mayor's accusations against an employee in closed session without giving the employee prior notice violated the requirement of actual notice to the employee. *Campana v. City of Greenfield*, 38 F. Supp. 2d 1043 (1999).

**19.851 Closed sessions by government accountability board.** The government accountability board shall hold each meeting of the board for the purpose of deliberating concerning an investigation of any violation of the law under the jurisdiction of the ethics and accountability division of the board in closed session under this section. Prior to convening under this section, the government accountability board shall vote to convene in closed session in the manner provided in s. 19.85 (1). No business may be conducted by the government accountability board at any closed session under this section except that which relates to the purposes of the session as authorized in this section or as authorized in s. 19.85 (1).

**History:** 2007 a. 1.

**19.86 Notice of collective bargaining negotiations.**

Notwithstanding s. 19.82 (1), where notice has been given by either party to a collective bargaining agreement under subch. I, IV or V of ch. 111 to reopen such agreement at its expiration date, the employer shall give notice of such contract reopening as provided in s. 19.84 (1) (b). If the employer is not a governmental body, notice shall be given by the employer's chief officer or such person's designee.

**History:** 1975 c. 426; 1987 a. 305; 1993 a. 215; 1995 a. 27; 2007 a. 20.

**19.87 Legislative meetings.** This subchapter shall apply to all meetings of the senate and assembly and the committees, subcommittees and other subunits thereof, except that:

(1) Section 19.84 shall not apply to any meeting of the legislature or a subunit thereof called solely for the purpose of scheduling business before the legislative body; or adopting resolutions of which the sole purpose is scheduling business before the senate or the assembly.

(2) No provision of this subchapter which conflicts with a rule of the senate or assembly or joint rule of the legislature shall apply to a meeting conducted in compliance with such rule.

(3) No provision of this subchapter shall apply to any partisan caucus of the senate or any partisan caucus of the assembly, except as provided by legislative rule.

(4) Meetings of the senate or assembly committee on organization under s. 71.78 (4) (c) or 77.61 (5) (b) 3. shall be closed to the public.

**History:** 1975 c. 426; 1977 c. 418; 1987 a. 312 s. 17.

Sub. (3) applied to a closed meeting of the members of one political party on a legislative committee to discuss a bill. *State ex rel. Lynch v. Conta*, 71 Wis. 2d 662, 239 N.W.2d 313 (1976).

**19.88 Ballots, votes and records.** (1) Unless otherwise specifically provided by statute, no secret ballot may be utilized to determine any election or other decision of a governmental body except the election of the officers of such body in any meeting.

(2) Except as provided in sub. (1) in the case of officers, any member of a governmental body may require that a vote be taken at any meeting in such manner that the vote of each member is ascertained and recorded.

(3) The motions and roll call votes of each meeting of a governmental body shall be recorded, preserved and open to public inspection to the extent prescribed in subch. II of ch. 19.

**History:** 1975 c. 426; 1981 c. 335 s. 26.

Under sub. (1), a common council may not vote to fill a vacancy on the common council by secret ballot. 65 Atty. Gen. 131.

**19.89 Exclusion of members.** No duly elected or appointed member of a governmental body may be excluded from any meeting of such body. Unless the rules of a governmental body provide to the contrary, no member of the body may be excluded from any meeting of a subunit of that governmental body.

**History:** 1975 c. 426.

**19.90 Use of equipment in open session.** Whenever a governmental body holds a meeting in open session, the body shall make a reasonable effort to accommodate any person desiring to record, film or photograph the meeting. This section does not permit recording, filming or photographing such a meeting in a manner that interferes with the conduct of the meeting or the rights of the participants.

**History:** 1977 c. 322.

**19.96 Penalty.** Any member of a governmental body who knowingly attends a meeting of such body held in violation of this subchapter, or who, in his or her official capacity, otherwise violates this subchapter by some act or omission shall forfeit without reimbursement not less than \$25 nor more than \$300 for each such violation. No member of a governmental body is liable under this subchapter on account of his or her attendance at a meeting held

in violation of this subchapter if he or she makes or votes in favor of a motion to prevent the violation from occurring, or if, before the violation occurs, his or her votes on all relevant motions were inconsistent with all those circumstances which cause the violation.

History: 1975 c. 426.

The state need not prove specific intent to violate the Open Meetings Law. *State v. Swanson*, 92 Wis. 2d 310, 284 N.W.2d 655 (1979).

**19.97 Enforcement.** (1) This subchapter shall be enforced in the name and on behalf of the state by the attorney general or, upon the verified complaint of any person, by the district attorney of any county wherein a violation may occur. In actions brought by the attorney general, the court shall award any forfeiture recovered together with reasonable costs to the state; and in actions brought by the district attorney, the court shall award any forfeiture recovered together with reasonable costs to the county.

(2) In addition and supplementary to the remedy provided in s. 19.96, the attorney general or the district attorney may commence an action, separately or in conjunction with an action brought under s. 19.96, to obtain such other legal or equitable relief, including but not limited to mandamus, injunction or declaratory judgment, as may be appropriate under the circumstances.

(3) Any action taken at a meeting of a governmental body held in violation of this subchapter is voidable, upon action brought by the attorney general or the district attorney of the county wherein the violation occurred. However, any judgment declaring such action void shall not be entered unless the court finds, under the facts of the particular case, that the public interest in the enforcement of this subchapter outweighs any public interest which there may be in sustaining the validity of the action taken.

(4) If the district attorney refuses or otherwise fails to commence an action to enforce this subchapter within 20 days after

receiving a verified complaint, the person making such complaint may bring an action under subs. (1) to (3) on his or her relation in the name, and on behalf, of the state. In such actions, the court may award actual and necessary costs of prosecution, including reasonable attorney fees to the relator if he or she prevails, but any forfeiture recovered shall be paid to the state.

(5) Sections 893.80 and 893.82 do not apply to actions commenced under this section.

History: 1975 c. 426; 1981 c. 289; 1995 a. 158.

**Judicial Council Note, 1981:** Reference in sub. (2) to a "writ" of mandamus has been removed because that remedy is now available in an ordinary action. See s. 781.01, stats., and the note thereto. [Bill 613-A]

Awards of attorney fees are to be at a rate applicable to private attorneys. A court may review the reasonableness of the hours and hourly rate charged, including the rates for similar services in the area, and may in addition consider the peculiar facts of the case and the responsible party's ability to pay. *Hodge v. Town of Turtle Lake*, 190 Wis. 2d 181, 526 N.W.2d 784 (Ct. App. 1994).

Actions brought under the open meetings and open records laws are exempt from the notice provisions of s. 893.80 (1). *Auchinleck v. Town of LaGrange*, 200 Wis. 2d 585, 547 N.W.2d 587 (1996), 94-2809.

Failure to bring an action under this section on behalf of the state is fatal and deprives the court of competency to proceed. *Fabyan v. Achtenhagen*, 2002 WI App 214, 257 Wis. 2d 310, 652 N.W.2d 649, 01-3298.

Complaints under the open meetings law are not brought in the individual capacity of the plaintiff but on behalf of the state, subject to the 2-year statute of limitations under s. 893.93 (2). *Leung v. City of Lake Geneva*, 2003 WI App 129, 265 Wis. 2d 674, 666 N.W.2d 104, 02-2747.

When a town board's action was voided by the court due to lack of statutory authority, an action for enforcement under sub. (4) by an individual as a private attorney general on behalf of the state against individual board members for a violation of the open meetings law that would subject the individual board members to civil forfeitures was not rendered moot. *Lawton v. Town of Barton*, 2005 WI App 16, 278 Wis. 2d 388, 692 N.W.2d 304, 04-0659

**19.98 Interpretation by attorney general.** Any person may request advice from the attorney general as to the applicability of this subchapter under any circumstances.

History: 1975 c. 426.