

County budget handling may be illegal

Officials deny public access, then change their minds

By Scott Williams

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Shawano County officials withheld the county's 2017 budget proposal from public scrutiny earlier this week — only to reverse themselves one day later — in what an open-government advocate described as showing “contempt” for the law and the public's right-to-know.

County Administrative Coordinator Brent Miller on Wednesday denied The Shawano Leader access to the budget, copies of which were piled high in plain view inside the county courthouse just a few feet from where Miller was standing.

Miller said the newspaper would have to file a written request to see the county's 2017 spending proposal, and that he

would take up to 10 days to respond to the request.

County Corporation Counsel Tony Kordus supported the administrator's action in refusing the newspaper access to the budget. Informed that copies of the budget proposal were sitting readily available a few feet away, Kordus said: “So what?”

With the Shawano County Finance Committee scheduled to consider the budget on Friday, the county's decision to deny public access meant that the committee could take action on the taxpayer-funded spending plan for 2017 without the public knowing what was proposed.

The county budget for 2016 included \$51 million in public spending and more than \$15 million in property taxes.

Bill Lueders, president of the Wis-

ONLINE

To see a video of Shawano County officials refusing The Shawano Leader access to the county budget, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy5GPiwmC6s&feature=youtu.be

consin Freedom of Information Council, said a county budget proposal is a public document that taxpayers and others in Shawano County have a right to see before their elected representatives vote on it. Lueders said it appeared to him that Miller and Kordus had “clearly and brazenly” violated the state's open records law.

“It shows contempt for the law and, frankly, contempt for the public,” Lueders said. “I think the citizens of Shawano County should be outraged.”

The open records law states that

government agencies such as Shawano County must permit access to public records “at all times” during regular office hours. The law also states that county officials must respond to a request for access to public records “as soon as practicable and without delay.”

Penalties for violating the open records law include civil fines of up to \$1,000.

After The Shawano Leader contacted members of the County Board and informed Miller and Kordus that the newspaper was preparing a report on their actions, the county reversed course on Thursday and provided access to the budget.

The 315-page document indicates that county officials are considering a plan for 2017 that would increase prop-