

BUDGET

FROM A1

erty taxes by more than \$100,000 while decreasing spending slightly overall.

The finance committee is scheduled to consider

"I think the citizens of Shawano County should be outraged."

BILL LUEDERS, president, Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council

the budget at 8:15 a.m. Friday and forward a recommendation for full County Board consideration later this month.

County staff and committee members have spent several weeks preparing the budget and discussing changes. County records indicate that the finance committee on Sept. 19 approved a preliminary draft of the budget — a copy of which The Shawano Leader also has requested.

To inform taxpayers and to allow for timely public debate, the newspaper made a written request on Monday for access to the budget prepared for Friday's meeting. Miller refused, saying that the document was still at a print shop where copies were being prepared. The newspaper requested access to whatever document was sent to the printer; Miller again refused.

On Wednesday, multiple copies of the budget were back from the printer and were stacked up inside Miller's office at the courthouse. Miller

then said he would not allow the newspaper to review the budget until after Friday's meeting of the finance committee. He said such protocol was a longstanding practice in the county.

Insisting that the budget was not a public record under state law until it is distributed to the committee, he added: "I've already checked with legal on that."

The state's open records law defines a public record as "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, that has been created or is being kept by an authority."

Lueders, whose council is a private advocacy group for open government in Wisconsin, said it sounded like Shawano County officials were creating needless delays and withholding a public record that should have been available for public

scrutiny upon request.

"There is nothing in the law that allows government officials to withhold a completed document until a public body has had a chance to talk it over," he said.

A member of Miller's staff on Thursday said he was reversing course and providing access to the budget after consulting with County Board members and being "authorized" by them to disclose the budget.

County Board members offered differing viewpoints on the matter.

Supervisor Robert Krause, a member of the finance committee, said he agreed with Miller's initial decision to withhold the budget from the public until it had been reviewed by the committee. Krause, too, said that was a longstanding practice in the county.

"We don't like to put stuff out to the public until the supervisors get it," Krause said.

Supervisor Deb Noffke, also on the finance committee, said she disagreed with county staff withholding the budget from public access and scrutiny.

"It's all public record," she said. "If somebody asks for something, give it to them."