



## Wisconsin Gov.-elect Scott Walker has record of openness

By Mark Pitsch • December 23, 2010

My first question was a softball: "Will you pledge right now to run the most open, transparent gubernatorial administration in the history of the universe?"

Gov.-elect Scott Walker's one-word reply: "Absolutely."

In fact, it's hard to imagine Walker will not oversee a more forthcoming executive branch than his predecessor once he's sworn into office Jan. 3. During his eight years in office, Gov. Jim Doyle and members of his administration increasingly operated out of a bunker, shunning media inquiries, defying the state open records law and keeping his whereabouts under wraps.

One example: The governor's office waited to respond to a request from The Capital Times for letters regarding nominees to fill a judicial vacancy until just minutes before announcing its pick, a delay for which it is now being sued.

There is reason for optimism among open government advocates, based in part on Walker's record as Milwaukee's longtime county executive.

After the Milwaukee fiscal conservative group Citizens for Responsive Government asked for records of all county government expenditures, Walker's administration turned them over and the group put them on its website. Walker followed suit, posting spending records on the county's website as soon as they were entered in the county's own record-keeping system.

Walker said he'd like to do the same thing for state agencies as governor.

"I view it not as an obligation, but as an opportunity," he told me.

Conservatives like exposing the cost of government, because they believe it will more likely make people clamor for smaller government. But, regardless of the motivations, letting voters and taxpayers know more about the government is a good thing.

Walker also pledged that his administration will be responsive to open records requests, will regularly submit to questioning by the media, will disclose the names of those inside and outside the administration that he's meeting with, and will provide detailed weekly — perhaps even daily — schedules.

"I want to be aggressive," he said of his philosophy toward open government. "I think my success in Milwaukee County was in part because the voters didn't always agree with me, but they understood where I was coming from and what I wanted to get done."

Walker's track record on these issues, however, is far from perfect. Critics say the calendars he released to the media weren't always detailed. His administration sometimes fought records requests — becoming more stingy as his campaign for governor accelerated.

In one case, for example, the county refused for months to release records to a disability-rights group on patient assaults at the county mental health complex. It did so only after the group threatened to sue. It was only after his election victory that Walker approved the release to the county auditor of a separate potentially embarrassing 2008 report on safety at the facility.

As governor-elect, Walker has discussed abolishing the Commerce Department and creating a new public-private partnership modeled on the Indiana Economic Development Corp. But that might not be a good thing for transparency. One Indianapolis television station reported the Indiana agency would

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not release records to support its claims that it helped bring more than 115,000 new jobs to the state. The station's investigation showed the agency had inflated those claims. As a result, the state's former deputy budget director — now with the conservative **Cato Institute** — calls the agency a "boondoggle."

Walker takes office amid hopes he'll be a **model** of government transparency. We'll have a better idea at this time next year whether those hopes are justified.

**Your Right to Know** is a monthly column distributed by the Freedom of Information Council ([www.wisfoic.org](http://www.wisfoic.org)), a nonprofit group dedicated to open government. Mark Pitsch, a council member, is an assistant city editor at The Wisconsin State Journal.

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