

## Action Alert on Bill to Shield Information on Campaign Donors

Written by By Bill Lueders

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The Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council is issuing an Action Alert on proposed legislation to end the requirement that donors to political candidates or committees identify their principal employer. The proposal was introduced Oct. 15 by Assembly Speaker Robin Vos as an [amendment](#) to [AB387](#), a bill to rewrite state campaign finance laws, and promptly approved by a state legislative committee, according to a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel [report](#)

We believe this legislation is unneeded, and that it would represent a retreat from the state's traditions of openness, contrary to the express [recent declaration](#) of lawmakers. It would complicate the task of tracking down donations by particular interest groups, and increase the possibility that donors will be misidentified.

Previous legislative attempts to eliminate this reporting requirement, including [SB292](#) in the 2011-2012 session, were unsuccessful after drawing opposition from advocates of open and accountable government.

Proponents have argued that it is necessary to shield the names of employers to prevent them from being targeted or harassed. Besides a dearth of examples, this argument fails because this bill would do nothing to prevent this from occurring. Major donors could still, with a bit more work, be associated with particular employers, especially in cases where they are officers of these companies.

There are many legitimate uses of this information. For instance, it is used by the nonpartisan Wisconsin Democracy Campaign and others to link campaign donors into interest groups.

The provision would make it harder to track the affiliations of multiple contributors, undercutting one of the few tools available to the public to associate donations with interest groups. And the Government Accountability Board has said access to this information was helpful when it investigated allegations that Bill Gardner of Wisconsin & Southern Railroad used his employees to make contributions in excess of legal limits. Mr. Gardner was convicted of two felonies in connection with these donations.

Finally, having access to employer information makes it less likely that a given donor will be mistaken for someone else. While it appears that donors who give more than \$200 must report their occupation, there are multiple instances in which different donors have the same name and occupation, such as "attorney."

On July 9, the state Assembly overwhelmingly passed a [resolution](#) stating that it "remains committed to our state's open record and open government laws and policies, and will take all necessary steps to ensure that these laws and policies are preserved without modification or degradation."

AB387, as amended, clearly violates this stated intent and should be widely opposed, in the

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brief period of time before it is likely to be voted on. The Council encourages its members to report and editorialize on this topic, providing additional examples about how having access to this information has served the public interest.