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June 2, 2011

Senator Alberta Darling
Room 317 East
State Capitol
Madison, WI
Via fax to 608-267-0588

Representative Robin Vos
Room 309 East
State Capitol
Madison, WI
Via fax to 608-282-3663

Dear Co-chairs Darling and Vos,

On May 24, 2011 the Joint Committee on Finance adopted omnibus motion 306 regarding the Government Accountability Board. Provision 6 of the motion reads as follows:

"6. Statements of Economic Interest. Amend current law to specific that statements of economic interest and any information contained therein may only be available for public inspection and copying at the office of the Government Accountability Board."

On behalf of ACLU members across Wisconsin I urge you to reconsider this provision. It undermines transparency in government thereby subverting Wisconsinites' political free speech rights. Requiring residents from across Wisconsin to travel hours to Madison and back home to learn about the significant financial relationships of their public officials will make it impossible for many people to exercise their rights.

Currently, nearly 2,400 state public officials, candidates, and nominees file Statements of Economic Interest with the GAB each year. The GAB on its website indicates that it "experiences virtually 100% compliance with the law..." On average, according to the same website, the public examined 500 statements of economic interest each year.

While the GAB does not currently give access to the actual Statements online, it does make the indices to the Statements available online. Motion 306 will prevent the GAB from providing

these indices online; they "may only be available for public inspection and copying at the office of the Government Accountability Board."

There is no evidence that the limited online access to information from the Statements of Economic Interests has been abused. Given the compliance rate with the law filing isn't a burden, and even if it were restricting access would not reduce any burden on filers. As in most online posting of existing information the cost must be de minimus.

Apparently the reason for decreasing the already limited transparency of this reporting process is to save the filers from embarrassment or the necessity of explaining their financial relationships to their constituents and voters.

Wisconsin residents deserve good government. They deserve to be able to make informed decisions about matters relevant to the public interest. They have a right to speak freely with the knowledge of the contents of the Statements of Economic Interest. Requiring Wisconsinites to travel to Madison to examine and copy these public records is an affront.

At a minimum please continue online access to the indices and allow residents to request copies without going to Madison. Better yet make the Statements themselves available online on the GAB website.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chris Ahmuty". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Christopher Ahmuty
Executive Director

cc: members of the Joint Committee on Finance via email