

Acting on a tip, downstate 'watchdog' group floods Maine Township with FOIA requests



Maine Township Town Hall, 1700 Ballard Road in Park Ridge. (Jennifer Johnson / Pioneer Press)

By **Jennifer Johnson**
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A downstate "watchdog" group's request for township information recently generated protests from a member of the Maine Township Town Board.

Trustee Kim Jones complained to the board in January that her personal analysis of township legal fees found they had "increased by more than 100 percent" during the last seven months of 2017 — and she attributed this in part to freedom of information act requests from members of [Edgar County Watchdogs](#), a group that, according to its website, aims to "foster accountability, truth, and transparency in our local governing bodies."

"I'm not sure why we've received so many FOIA requests from a county that is four hours away with a population of 32 people per square mile," Jones said during a Jan. 23 town board meeting.

Jones added that answering FOIA requests takes staff time, and these hours "should have been utilized to serve the legitimate needs of Maine Township taxpayers and residents."

Jones' comments led to arguments among the elected officials — some talking over each other — and Trustee Susan Sweeney saying that "no responsible public official should complain about FOIA requests that serve a legitimate purpose," and adding that any legal costs associated with these requests "benefit residents who desire transparency in order to determine how government is managing taxpayer money and whether their government is in compliance with the open meetings act."

Kirk Allen of Edgar County Watchdogs said his group, despite its name, investigates government practices in various parts of Illinois, not just the county in which it originated. He said he submits FOIA requests to public bodies "all over the country."

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en said. "We're a mouthpiece for locals who are

Allen, a former township supervisor and trustee himself, said the group began examining Maine Township government after receiving anonymous requests to its "tip line," one of them asking Edgar County Watchdogs to look into Supervisor Laura Morask's hiring of a former trustee without board approval to a new position within the township food pantry. The board's three newly elected trustees also balked at the hiring, and the employee resigned soon after.

Allen said he filed eight separate FOIA requests with Maine Township last year. The requests, filed between Aug. 4, 2017, and Oct. 26, 2017, include requests for 12 months of credit card statements for any credit cards used by the township, copies of video recordings of meetings, meeting minutes, statutes, and legal bills for a long-time attorney hired by the General Assistance department, among other documents, according to emails he shared with the Park Ridge Herald-Advocate.

Records provided by the township confirm that eight FOIA requests were made by Allen.

Between April and December of 2017, the period during which three new trustees and a new supervisor took office, Maine Township received about 15 additional FOIA requests from other individuals, according to records provided to the Park Ridge Herald-Advocate from the township. These requests sought various township expenses, recorded property violations, purchasing records, the township's annual payroll, records for specific private properties, vendor and supply lists, various information on the Maine Township Food Pantry, and a list of Mainstreamers members and township employees who participated in a Hawaiian trip.

Edgar County Watchdogs have also filed complaints with the Illinois Attorney General's Office regarding township practices. One complaint alleged that the board improperly approved the destruction of an audio recording of a closed session meeting when the three newest trustees were incorrectly told they had to abstain from voting and the township clerk, a non-voting member, was allowed to cast a vote instead. The Attorney General's Office agreed, according to a letter dated Jan. 4. In response, Township Attorney Dan Dowd acknowledged that the clerk is not a voting member of the board and that the "mistake was the direct result of my failure to advise the board" of this.

"The township has decided going forward to retain audio cassettes of special meetings indefinitely in order to ensure that it will be available to the public after the minutes of a closed session are released for public inspection," Dowd's letter to the Attorney General's Office added.

Another complaint filed by Edgar County Watchdogs, involving the board's approval of township bills before its regular meeting and in a small room of Town Hall, also led to changes in practice by the board to conform to the Illinois Open Meetings Act.

Jones, during the town board's Jan. 23 meeting, accused Trustee Sweeney of being in "constant contact" with Edgar County Watchdogs, calling it "inappropriate."

Sweeney told the Park Ridge Herald-Advocate that she never asked the group to investigate the township.

"This is not me dictating anything," he said. "They are doing this on their own."

Allen said his group has not been asked by Maine Township trustees to look into any particular issues, though he said he has had conversations with Sweeney and Trustee Claire McKenzie. These conversations were largely from an "advice standpoint," he said.

Allen said his group works to keep government officials accountable to state laws and statutes.

"The ultimate goal would be to get these folks — all of the trustees and the supervisor — to read the law on what they should be doing. Then we'd have a lot less legal bills," he said.

Jones alleged that the township's legal fees to its regular attorney when from \$13,843 during 2016, to \$31,158 in 2017.

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