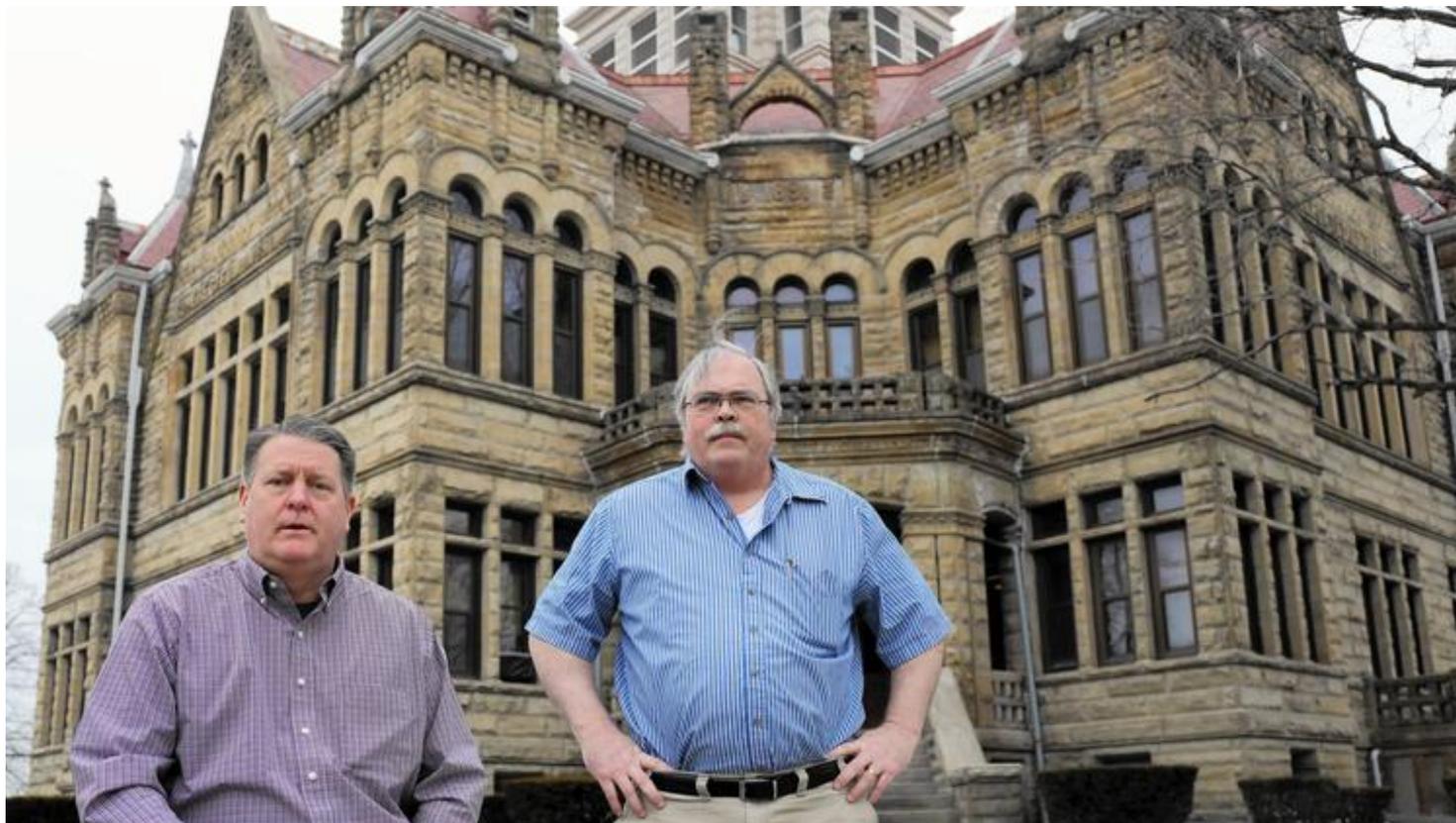


Small-town watchdogs search for misconduct, misspending



Kirk Allen, left, and John Kraft, who call themselves the Edgar County Watchdogs, stand outside the county courthouse on Feb. 11, 2015, in Paris, Ill. (Brian Cassella, Chicago Tribune)

By **Steve Mills**
Chicago Tribune

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Edgar County Watchdogs are self-appointed watchdogs who tap into disaffection with government

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They are the muckrakers of the farm fields, bloodhounds for small-town waste and corruption, self-appointed guardians of taxpayer money who comb through the books of municipal governments all across Illinois in search of misconduct and misspending.

Kirk Allen and John **Kraft** call themselves the Edgar County Watchdogs. Others call them busybodies with too

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With a digital soapbox and knowledge of state open records and meetings laws, Allen and Kraft have been calling out mayors, board chairmen and state's attorneys since fall 2010 when they became frustrated over separate local issues and decided to do something together about them.

"Some folks love us. Some hate us," Allen said. "The ones that hate us, we've usually uncovered something about them or their family."

Although they can be scattershot in identifying their targets and sometimes focused on what, at least at first blush, seems like minutiae, the two military veterans, both in their early 50s, tap into a deep vein of disaffection for government and how elected officials operate. That is especially so in a state with more units of government than any other and one with a long history of political corruption.

They spend most of their time in the rural communities around their homes in Edgar County, located in the state's midsection not far from the Indiana line. But they have ranged from southern Illinois to as far north as DuPage County, where they recently got involved in the controversy surrounding the buyout package for a community college president.

Last year they even threatened to make citizen's arrests of a small park district board whose members had refused to allow public comment at a meeting. In a video of the incident, Kraft can be heard saying, "You're under arrest, sir," as a member of the Clark County Park District board walked away. Allen called the sheriff, who confirmed for board members that by law they indeed must allow time for public comments.

"I understand what they're doing, and I really don't disagree," said Jerry Parsley, the longtime sheriff in Clark County who settled the matter. "But things are not always as black and white as they make them seem."

Kraft still carries a folded printout of the state's citizen's arrest statute with him, saying he doesn't know when he will need it next.

To be sure, [Freedom of Information Act](#) requests serve a worthwhile purpose, shining a light on often too-secretive government operations. But the duo's aggressive and sometimes sanctimonious style rub a lot of public officials the wrong way. Each week, they send out close to a dozen FOIA requests and post numerous stories on their website.

Seeing them walk in the door can sour a small-town clerk's day. The Clark County park board started receiving so many requests for documents it devoted part of an employee's day to records requests, taking the worker away from other duties, said Executive Director Charity Murphy.

"Was it really necessary to go to that extreme? That's my question," Murphy said of the citizen's arrests. "Is that really being helpful?"

They make an interesting team — Allen is more buttoned-down than Kraft, who is a bit rumped and has gray hair that is often mussed. Allen is more forceful as a public speaker than Kraft. It is not unusual for one to

follow the other to the lectern at the many meetings they attend, Allen in blue jeans, Kraft in khakis. They are both Republicans but go after officials of both parties.

Allen, who retired after 20 years in the Air Force, works for little pay as a township supervisor and volunteers as chief of the fire department in the town of Kansas, where he lives. Kraft, who served 22 years in the Army before retiring, lives in Paris and is in his last semester at [Eastern Illinois University](#), pursuing a master's degree in political science and public administration. Both are quite genial but can quickly get fired up over even the tiniest government's refusal to act openly.

They were attending a candidate's dinner in Paris more than four years ago and, in separate conversations, venting. Kraft had been at a school board meeting to ask to film a graduation and sell the video, but the board rebuffed him and then allowed somebody else to do it, he said. Allen, who is also an emergency medical technician in Kansas, was upset that local 911 dispatchers were not properly certified by the state.

They overheard each other's conversation and realized they had a common cause.

"We talked for a little bit and decided, 'Let's do something about it,'" Kraft said.

"I started going to meetings and submitting FOIAs," Allen said. "Since then, we've been uncovering all sorts of stuff."

Among their successes has been forcing out employees and officials for various violations and contributing to municipalities recovering much-needed money.

They said their website, [edgarcountywatchdogs.com](#), attracts about 75,000 page views a month, far more than at the start when they would high-five each other over 50 views a week.

Most elected officials, especially in and around Edgar County, know them. A good many do not like them. But their reputations are spreading.

Last month Allen and Kraft charged that Clarendon Hills village Trustee Ed Reid had been late paying his water bills three times, a violation of municipal law that bars officials from holding office if they are indebted to the municipality they serve. A longtime volunteer in the DuPage County village, Reid stepped down from the board and abandoned a bid for village president.

"It's one thing to run on differences of opinions," Reid said at the time, "but my family just doesn't need to be involved with anything like this for a volunteer job."

In Vermilion County, next door to Edgar County, Allen and Kraft are regulars at Tuesday night board meetings and are frequent critics.

"I'm sure on occasion they're right," said Bill Donahue, a county prosecutor whose job is to represent the Vermilion board. "But if you're not on their side, you're not only dead wrong, but you're a criminal. Politics is a

rough sport, but they take the attitude everyone is a criminal. It's not productive."

A meeting of the Vermilion County Board in Danville recently got underway with a prayer for a "peaceful, agreeable meeting." When it was time for public comments, Allen criticized a proposed intergovernmental agreement between the county and its 911 system. He cited a legal opinion from the attorney general's office and offered a solution to the issue. Board members approved the deal anyway.

Kraft spoke later on a land deal the board made that, he said, was essentially a gift of public farmland.

"I just want to let you know it's not the last time you'll hear about this one," he told the board.

Donahue said that while Allen and Kraft have won followers, their support is not deep or growing.

"The people they attract are people who are extremely negative about government and buy into conspiracies," he said.

The next morning, Allen and Kraft were at the Edgar County Board. Again, Allen spoke first, this time about licensing and insurance at the county 911 system. He cited state law and accused employees of misconduct. Kraft spoke next, opening a computer tablet and talking about the county airport and allegations of corruption there.

At times, they sound like a law unto themselves, willing if not eager to call to account those who fall short of what they expect of government officials, even those who volunteer their time on some small board. They said they do not aim to run good people out of office.

"We give them the opportunity to correct what they're doing," Kraft said. "The ones that do, we tend to leave them alone. The ones that don't, they see us at the board meeting."

They believe more people support them quietly than do openly, suggesting that the pastoral beauty of this part of the state obscures an undercurrent of disenchantment. They take a long view on issues, not expecting immediate change.

"They never fix anything in a meeting," Allen said. "They always do it later, so it doesn't look like we forced them to."

Robert Bogue, a retiree in Edgar County, said Allen and Kraft offer a lifeline to residents feeling shut out by local government.

"If you have a problem, who the hell do you go to?" he asked. "John and Kirk provide ideas, information about how to approach these things."

Ted Hartke, an engineer who said noise from wind farms has made his home almost uninhabitable, said he and many others admire Allen and Kraft for their fearlessness and willingness to challenge public officials on their own turf.

Allen and Kraft said they have a lot more work to do. The flow of tips about misconduct has not begun to slow.

"We're really just getting started," Allen said.

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