

EDITORIAL: Show them the money

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The State Bar of Wisconsin taxes its members and then refuses to completely reveal how that money is spent.

It sidesteps full disclosure by straddling the line between public agency and private corporation, and case history confirms the State Bar has every right to do so.

But responsible leadership means not merely meeting the minimum legal standards, but adhering to a higher moral code. A strong leader earns trust and confidence by stamping out speculation and replacing it with fact.

That onus of responsibility extends to those who are led, particularly Wisconsin lawyers who may not practice unless they pay membership dues. Those people should demand complete transparency from their leader, and they should be outraged when they don't get it. Silence condones the act.

Yet it is with silence that the majority of members respond to the State Bar's practice of not revealing specific program expenses and specific salaries of staff members, including that of Executive Director George Brown. Almost comically, that extends to withholding the information from the Board of Governors and Finance Committee, the two groups responsible for working on and approving the State Bar's budget.

The State Bar's leaders' silence matches that of the members. That was exactly how Brown and Finance Committee Chairwoman Margaret Wrenn Hickey responded to reporter James Briggs' repeated requests to explain why certain financial information is kept private.

Brown and Hickey treated the reporter as if he were reading them their Miranda rights. Their invocation of the right to remain silent creates suspicion even though no offense has been alleged.

As soon as is practical, Brown should completely open the bar's books to at least the Finance Committee and the Board of Governors. The new slogan should be the arms-wide-open, "We have nothing to hide," replacing the old nod-and-wink, "Trust us."

If the leaders will not change the policy, transparency-loving members should run a slate of State Bar officer candidates who will.

Mandatory membership and mandatory dues should mean mandatory disclosure of how that money is spent, not because the law requires it, but because responsible leaders do.