



WISCONSIN Counties

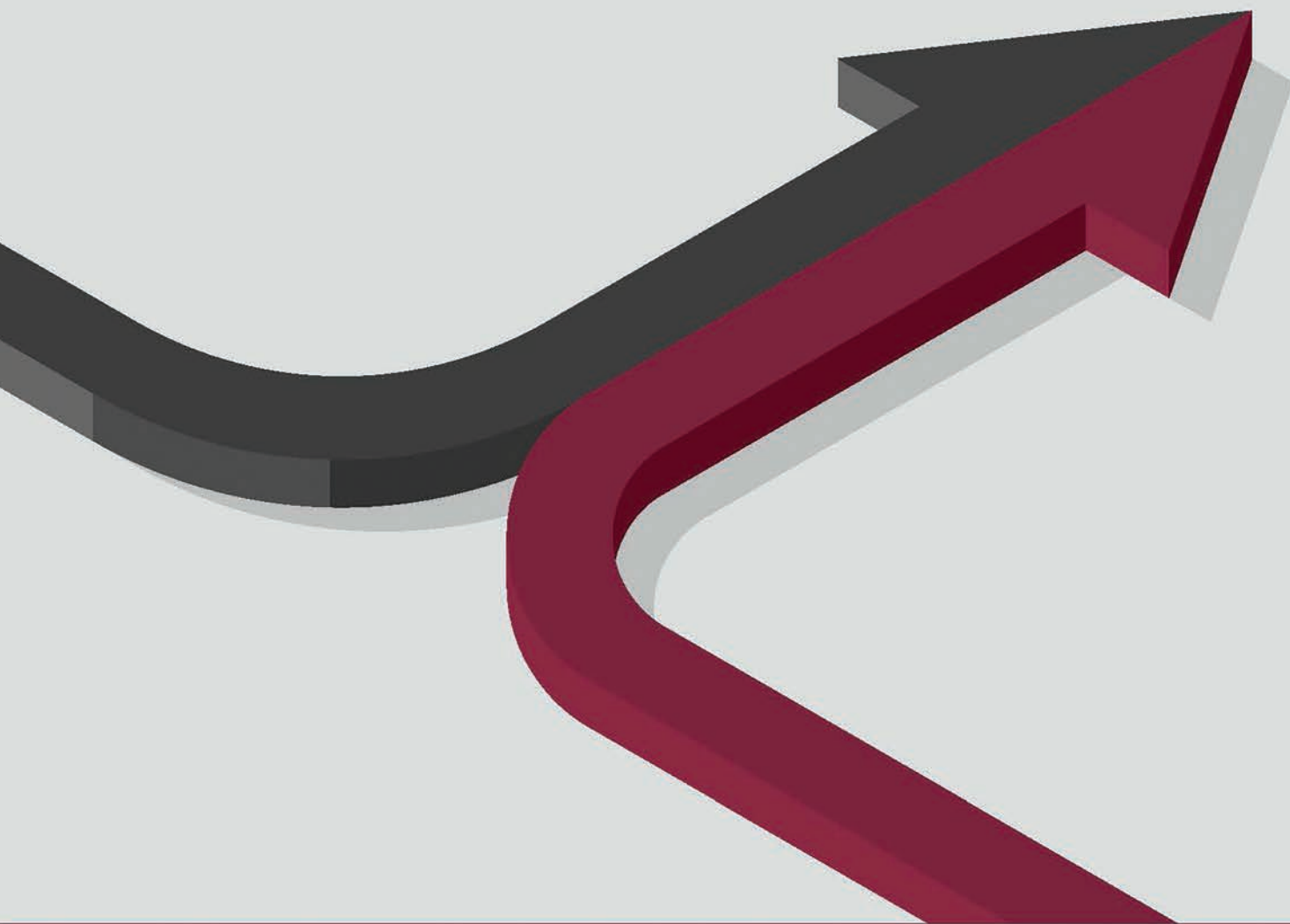
OCTOBER 2024

Investing in Our Counties

**A focus on
transportation
funding**

**A three-part series featuring the
WCA 2025-26 legislative priorities**

ALSO: Discover Wisconsin Photo Contest | Electioneering and Political Expression



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WISCONSIN Counties

OCTOBER 2024

| Volume 88, Number 10



Cover photo: The 2024 Discover Wisconsin calendar contest winning photo of Dells Mill in Eau Claire County by Michael Leis. See page 34 for details.

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From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

President & CEO

Recognizing Our County Government Friends

Each fall, we are honored to recognize individuals who have demonstrated extraordinary dedication and support to county government with the Friend Of County Government and Friend In County Government awards. Those selected are people with a deep and abiding appreciation for this state and its people.

This year, the WCA chose former Wisconsin Department of Transportation Secretary Craig Thompson and former Racine County Executive Jonathan Delagrave for these distinguished honors, which were presented at the WCA Annual Conference in La Crosse County in September.

Most recently, Craig served as secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation under Gov. Tony Evers for nearly six years. Prior to that, he served as the executive director of the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin for almost 12 years and as the legislative director of the Wisconsin Counties Association, where he got his start in 1991.

It is often said that WisDOT is the most highly regarded and well-managed agency in the Evers administration and that this is due to the agency's leadership. When presented with such high praise, Craig always answers the same — the success and reputation of the agency are attributable to the employees of the department. Giving credit to others has been one of Craig's most attractive qualities throughout his professional career. Add in his attributes of vision, strategic thinking, loyalty, empathy, and a tremendous sense of humor and you are getting close to knowing the real Craig Thompson.

Craig's roots are in county government, and while counties did not receive all that we requested during his tenure as WisDOT secretary, we were always welcome at the table and had our voices heard. Craig's thorough understanding of local government resulted in fair treatment in a complex infrastructure system. Our state's transportation system has moved forward by every measure under his leadership as secretary, positioning our state for future success.

While Craig has been a friend of county government since he first joined the county family in 1991, the WCA is proud to formally recognize him as its 2024 Friend Of County Government.

We are equally proud to posthumously award the 2024 Friend In County Government award to former Racine County Executive Jonathan Delagrave. The August issue of Wisconsin Counties includes my heartfelt tribute to Jonathan, who we unexpectedly lost earlier this summer. His contributions to Racine County and the entire state of Wisconsin will live on for generations to come. It was an honor and a privilege to work alongside him.

As I said in that earlier column, Jonathan lived a life where kindness was at the core of everything he did. In the end, that is the legacy that will remain with his children, his family, his colleagues and all of us in the county family.

Please join the WCA in congratulating Craig, and in Jonathan's memory, rededicating ourselves to making Wisconsin the best place to live, work and play. ■

Stay connected. Visit wicounties.org to access resources and learn about events.

Connect with the WCA on Facebook, LinkedIn and X for the latest updates.

ISSN: 0749-6818
USPS — 687-940

Official publication of the
WISCONSIN COUNTIES ASSOCIATION

Established under
Wis. Statute 59.52 (22) for:

1. Furtherance of better county government;
2. Protection of county interests.

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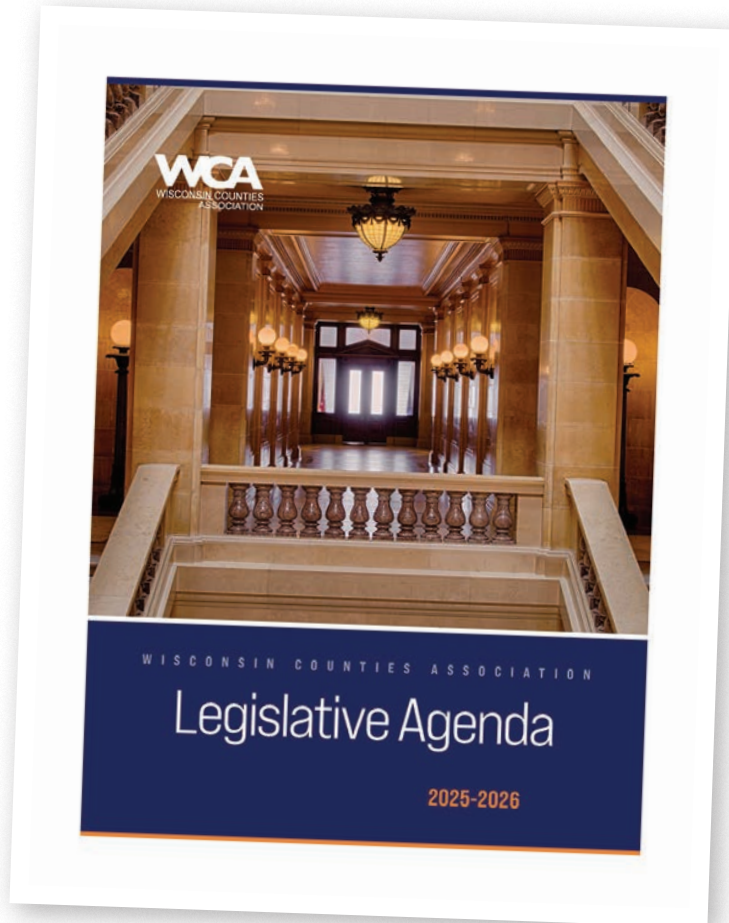
Published monthly by the
Wisconsin Counties Association,
22 E. Mifflin St., Ste. 900,
Madison, WI 53703. Periodical
postage paid in Madison, WI.

Subscription rate: \$20 per annum.
Wisconsin Counties, a monthly
magazine, is distributed to
subscribers in all 72 Wisconsin
counties. Readers include county-
elected and non-elected officials;
state legislators; state agency
personnel; state, city, town and
village officials; and employees of
nonprofit corporations providing
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2025-2026 Legislative Agenda

The WCA legislative agenda for the upcoming biennium covers a wide range of county services and programs.



WCA's main legislative priorities will focus on increased funding for transportation, mental health and the court system.

In this issue of Wisconsin Counties, we'll explore the needs and challenges of counties in maintaining a viable transportation system in the state. We'll take a similarly in-depth look at the status of funding for mental health services and the court system in the November and December issues, respectively.

Download the complete 2025-2026 WCA Legislative Agenda at wicounties.org.

Watch for upcoming issues on:

- **November:** Mental Health Funding
- **December:** Court Funding

Counties Face Complex Budget Issues

The funding of county government in Wisconsin has been fairly constant for decades. Three primary sources of revenue — local property taxes, state aid, and an optional 0.5% sales tax — combine to generate about three-quarters of all county revenues.

One of the great challenges with this funding system is that counties have limited control over their revenues. State aids are set by the Legislature and governor every two years in the state budget. Since 2005, property taxes have been capped by levy limits. As a result, county revenues increased an average of 1.9% per year from 2005-2022, less than the average annual inflation rate of 2.4%.

While their funding is slightly different, Wisconsin municipalities have also struggled with revenue growth due to stagnant state aid and levy limits. In the fall of 2022, state legislators and the governor recognized the challenges local governments have been facing and began working with the WCA, the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, and the Wisconsin Towns Association to provide additional state funding.

After almost nine months of work by these organizations with local government leaders, state legislators and the governor, 2023 Wisconsin Act 12 was signed into law. This legislation helped counties in three important ways.

First, beginning in 2024, it increased the county portion of county and municipal aids by 55%, from \$123 million to \$191 million. While the dollar and percent increases varied by county, everyone saw significant increases in these aids.

Second, the state put aside \$300 million for local governments to work with each other to generate cost

savings in providing services. While these dollars are capped at \$10 million per year and are only available for a limited time, they provide significant financial incentives to improve how local services are provided.

And third, annual increases in shared revenues from the state are now tied to changes in state sales taxes. In other words, a portion of local funding is tied to the state economy and local governments have a tangible stake in state economic growth. Counties have had that to some degree with the county sales tax. This takes that ownership to another level.

The new state investment in local government was historic. It significantly increased a slice of the county “revenue pie.” At the same time, it should be recognized that this “slice” is relatively small compared to other county revenue sources.

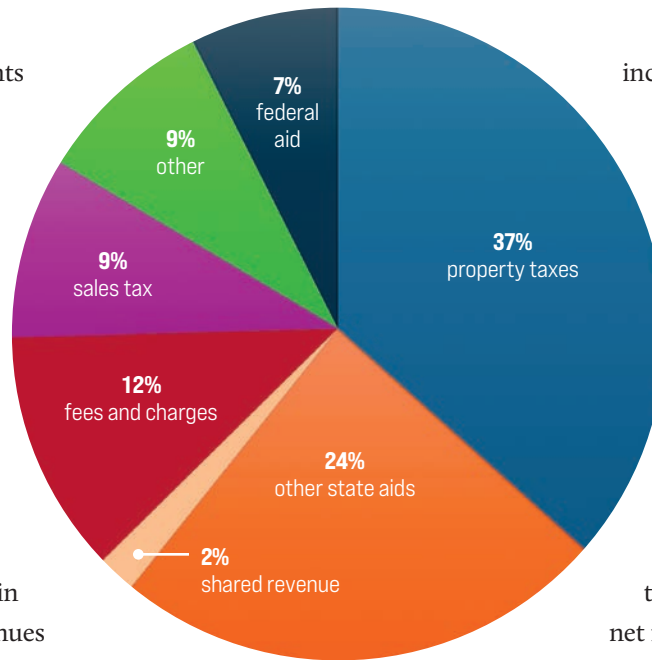
The county and municipal aid portion of shared revenue comprised 1.9% of all county revenue in 2022 (data for 2023 are not yet available). While important, this is one of the smallest revenue sources for many counties. For example, the property tax accounted for about 37% of total county revenue in 2022. Other state aid, primarily those for health and human services programs, comprised about 24% of funding while county sales tax collections represented about 9% of the total.

► Future

As mentioned above, perhaps the most noteworthy function of 2023 Act 12 was to link growth in shared revenue payments to the percentage growth in state sales tax collections. Wisconsin’s Legislative Fiscal Bureau projects a 2.3% increase in sales tax collections in fiscal year 2025,

2022 County Revenue Sources

Source: Wisconsin Department of Revenue



which means county governments will receive a 2.3% increase in their county and municipal aid payments. This ties local governments to the economic success of the entire state instead of just their county. When the state succeeds, local government shares in that success.

In addition, while the state investment was historic, it may not immediately fill all the gaps in local funding. With county revenues growing below the rate of inflation for nearly 20 years, it will take time for this new funding formula to fill those holes. However, county officials will know that these funds will grow from year to year.

In the short term, county officials understand that local demand for their services continues to grow. New shared revenue dollars help a lot. But outside of that, where can they turn?

The local option sales tax is limited to 0.5%, except in the city and county of Milwaukee, which were allowed to

increase their rates slightly due to 2023 Act 12. In most counties, local sales tax revenues have risen significantly over the past couple of years, but growth this year is small and is expected to be small next year.

That leaves the local property tax, the biggest source of county revenue.

These revenues have not kept pace with inflation due to levy limits, which are tied to net new construction. While the

limits largely achieved their stated goal of restricting growth in property taxes, they

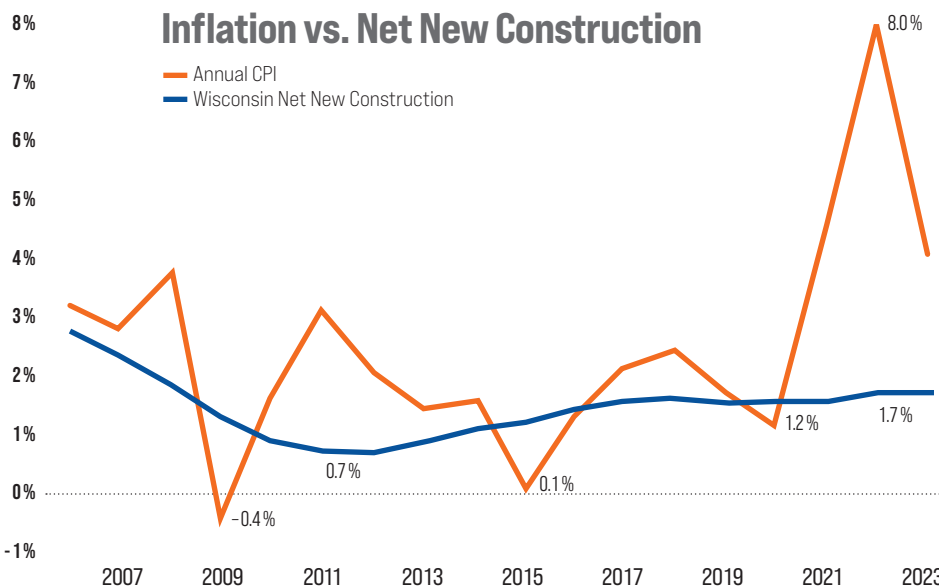
continue to strain county budgets. In 14 of the 18 years since levy limits were implemented, the average allowable increase was outpaced by inflation. Thus, in most years, goods and services increased in costs faster than local governments were able to raise revenue.

Shared revenue reform is helping counties navigate complex budget issues. Yet, county governments still face various challenges. Levy limits will likely continue to

increase slower than the rate of inflation. The shrinking size of the workforce will cause county government and local businesses to struggle to maintain and attract young, talented professionals, which can further exacerbate local and state budget problems.

County governments will continue to work efficiently, as they have always done, in order to properly fund core public services, such as county courts and law enforcement. ■

Forward Analytics is a Wisconsin-based research organization that provides state and local policymakers with nonpartisan analysis of issues affecting the state.





TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

Of all the services counties provide, transportation services are often the most visible to the public.

Whether they are filling potholes or plowing snow in the cold Wisconsin winters, county transportation services ensure our infrastructure remains safe and reliable for families, businesses and tourists.

While the public has a basic understanding of county transportation services, they are less likely to fully grasp the scope of those services. For example, Wisconsin is the only state in the nation where counties provide maintenance on the state highway and federal interstate systems in addition to the county highway system. This unique partnership between the state and county transportation departments offers unparalleled efficiencies and quality for all Wisconsin travelers.

Adequate funding for county transportation services has been, and will continue to be, a priority for the WCA. However, beyond just funding for counties, the state now needs to decide how infrastructure will be funded for the next generation. Declining gas tax revenue resulting from more fuel-efficient vehicles and a transition to electric cars leaves the state's transportation fund in need of new and evolving revenue sources. Absent a long-term plan for maintaining our state's multimodal system, Wisconsinites will suffer the consequences of an outdated and deteriorating infrastructure.





Investing in the Future of Wisconsin Transportation

By Kristina Boardman, Secretary, Wisconsin Department of Transportation

Transportation connects all of us. The statewide network of roads, rails, trails, airports and harbors is an essential link across our communities, bringing each of our 72 counties together to help the people of Wisconsin get to where they need to go safely and efficiently.

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation's unique partnership with county governments consistently plays a critical role as we strive to upgrade our transportation infrastructure and improve the quality of life in our communities. We've succeeded in that mission thanks to the dedicated leadership of former Secretary Craig Thompson. As our agency evolves and looks to the future, I am proud to take over the role of secretary of transportation.

Together with our colleagues and industry partners, we will build on the momentum of the incredible progress we've made in recent years. We've improved more than 7,400 miles of roads and more than 1,780 bridges in Wisconsin since 2019. That is quite an achievement, but we're not done yet.

Thanks to a robust state budget investment, and a continued surge of funding from the federal government,

WisDOT and our partners are prepared to deliver more than 400 highway improvement projects in the 2025 construction season in addition to investments in our railroad infrastructure, ports and harbors, and airports. These projects will have a significant impact on the multimodal transportation system in Wisconsin for years to come.



Kristina Boardman

■ Investing in infrastructure

WisDOT continues to support our local partners by providing resources to apply for Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) funds. More than a billion dollars has already been committed to multimodal improvements in every corner of the state, including the Blatnik Bridge in Superior, the Wisconsin River Bridge in Columbia County,

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a Sparta rest area, and many other transformative projects planned throughout Wisconsin.

Sustainability is a big part of our future and BIL provides an opportunity to prepare Wisconsin to meet the needs of a modern transportation system. The first electric vehicle charging stations supported by \$78 million in BIL funding are expected to be online this fall. The buildout of a network of fast charging stations will ensure those who choose environmentally friendly options can feel confident to travel the state without worrying where they'll get their next charge.

Alternative transportation options like passenger rail are taking shape since the launch of the new Borealis train in May. The Borealis doubles service through Wisconsin between the Twin Cities and Chicago. WisDOT's Corridor Investment and Development program is now exploring

the feasibility of other new or improved intercity passenger rail services in the state.

As we make the most of available federal resources, we're committed to significant investments in our transportation system and Wisconsin's economy through state-funded programs. Our new Agricultural Roads Improvement Program (ARIP) launched this year with about \$50 million to support 37 projects to rebuild roads and bridges that provide access to agricultural businesses. These improvements will support our rural communities and allow the agricultural industry to continue to succeed in Wisconsin. The remaining \$100 million in ARIP funding will be announced later this year.

WisDOT also awarded about \$174 million in state funding for the Local Roads Improvement Program (LRIP), to help local communities across Wisconsin complete more than 1,000 improvement projects over the next five years. Additional programs will invest more than \$1.5 billion in state and local projects in fiscal year 2025. These investments will continue to revitalize, modernize and transform how Wisconsinites travel and how products, goods and services get to our communities.

■ Prioritizing safety

Planning for the future requires an investment in safety. Our top priority is finding ways to eliminate crashes and injuries on our roads through engineering, enforcement and education. WisDOT is reinvesting in the commitment to our goal of zero deaths on Wisconsin roads through the launch of our Safety-First Initiative. It aims to enhance the agency's knowledge of safety-related best practices by researching new technologies for data gathering and engineering countermeasures. WisDOT also joined the U.S. Department of Transportation's Allies in Action campaign to reinforce our dedication to improving safety.

We continue to work with Gov. Tony Evers and the state Legislature to enact meaningful changes to state laws that will encourage safer driving behaviors and reduce the

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Boardman Becomes First Woman to Lead WisDOT

In September, Kristina Boardman succeeded Craig Thompson as secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, becoming the first woman to serve as secretary.

"For nearly 20 years, Kristina has been a key part of the WisDOT team, and her proven leadership and experience at the department, both as deputy secretary and during her time leading the Division of Motor Vehicles, have positioned her well to be an exceptional secretary," said Evers. "I look forward to the vision and insight she will bring as a member of my cabinet and trust that her transition into the role will be seamless."

Key accomplishments of her time as DMV administrator



include innovating an award-winning online service for customers to title and register their vehicles, implementing the federal REAL ID program in Wisconsin, and expanding opportunities to schedule appointments at DMV service centers.

"I have had the pleasure of working with and learning from Secretary Thompson and know I have important shoes to fill,"

said Boardman. "This is an incredibly exciting opportunity, and I am thankful to Gov. Evers for his confidence in me to take over this role. We have made some incredible progress these last several years to build transportation systems the people of Wisconsin can rely on, and I am excited to continue building upon that momentum as secretary of the department." □

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impacts of reckless driving. This year, Wisconsin enhanced penalties for reckless drivers who evade law enforcement officers and increased protections for highway workers by expanding a ban on cell phone use in areas where maintenance crews are at work.

To make sure more teens are prepared to take on the responsibility of driving, we're excited to launch a \$6 million, state-funded driver education grant program this fall. Eligible, low-income students can apply for a grant to help pay the costs of a driver education course.

As we get ready for the upcoming winter, we will continue our strong partnership and work to support Wisconsin counties to ensure maintenance crews have what they need to help keep our highways safe throughout the season.

■ Supporting the workforce

Wisconsin's economy depends on a skilled workforce with reliable access to safe and efficient transportation options. WisDOT is invested in the success of workers in our

industry and others who use our transportation system to get to work every day.

Our Transportation Economic Assistance (TEA) grant program supports job growth through critical transportation investments that allow industries to thrive in Wisconsin communities. We continue to lead successful programs like Highway Construction Skills Training, which prepares the next generation of highway workers.

Our transportation goals are not unique to Wisconsin, but our partnerships with Wisconsin counties are what set us apart and allow us to achieve our mission. We look forward to more opportunities to share ideas and develop new strategies with you, so together, we can build a robust, multimodal transportation system to connect us all and meet Wisconsin's needs long into the future. ■

Kristina Boardman became secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Transportation in September 2024. Boardman received a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science from Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, and has nearly three decades of state government service. She previously held the positions of deputy secretary and director of the Division of Motor Vehicles at WisDOT.



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County Crews on State Highways

AS WISCONSIN AS CHEESE CURDS AND FISH FRIES

By Robbie Krejci, Highway Commissioner, St. Croix County Highway Department

The next time you are driving to your favorite fish fry on a snowy Friday evening and encounter a county plow truck on a state highway, I hope you realize the sight is as Wisconsin as cheese curds and bratwurst.

Wisconsin, unlike any other state, relies on counties to complete routine maintenance on its state highway system, which includes over 12,000 miles of state and federal roadways. Maintenance is best completed by those most familiar with the highways, and other states are as envious of this partnership as they are of our cheese curds.

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation has individually contracted with each of the 72 counties in the state. These routine maintenance agreements, along with various policy documents, dictate the who, what, where, and how of maintenance that is completed on the state system.

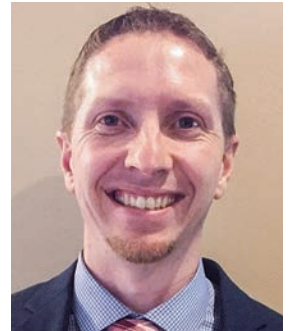
The maintenance agreements are evaluated regularly. The state and county review the expected level of service, type of highway, traffic volume, and many other factors. To maximize consistency across county lines, everything from how much a county can charge for the use of equipment to how many times the right-of-way can be mowed has been standardized in the agreements.

Overall, it's a partnership that serves the state and local

residents well. WisDOT can rely on local county personnel for emergency response, equipment, and other tasks necessary to ensure drivers don't notice the highway in their travels. Our residents benefit from an efficient system that allows county crews to maintain most of the roads in their path rather than waiting for state crews to respond.

However, WisDOT has not been immune to limited funding and reduced buying capacity. Funding levels for routine maintenance agreements have seen few increases since 2018. This strain is particularly evident with rising prices for materials, equipment and labor. While counties continue to create efficiencies and work with WisDOT to maximize investments in maintenance, consistent funding is needed.

Recently, five counties (i.e., Marathon, Outagamie, Rock, St. Croix and Waukesha) completed a deferred maintenance assessment on the state highways within their boundaries and found the agreements were being funded at 50-60% of what is needed to adequately maintain the state highways.



Robbie Krejci

RECENTLY, FIVE COUNTIES

(i.e., Marathon, Outagamie, Rock, St. Croix and Waukesha) completed a deferred maintenance assessment on the state highways within their boundaries and found the agreements were being funded at 50-60% of what is needed to adequately maintain the state highways.

When adequate funding is not available for routine maintenance, it creates a difficult loop that becomes increasingly hard to break. The small pothole expands, the larger pothole becomes many, and the highway becomes difficult and unsafe to travel. WisDOT must then allocate precious funding for improvement projects.

Counties work tirelessly to maintain the state highway system like their own. We try to apply the correct maintenance treatment when it's needed to maximize the life of the highway. But when no funding exists for good, routine maintenance, premature pavement failure occurs, and we start the loop again. The greatest value for the money comes from maintaining highways that are in good condition and prolonging their life. When maintenance

funding is only available to fill the pothole, we can't extend the life of the highway.

We all need to work together and support sustainable funding to maintain our entire highway system — state, county and local roads. When one system isn't functioning, the others will soon feel the additional strain. Whether it's commerce for our thriving business community or just a family going to a Friday night fish fry, we all benefit from good, timely highway maintenance. The counties in Wisconsin are working tirelessly to make it happen. ■

Robbie Krejci, P.E., is the highway commissioner for St. Croix County. He has 22 years of experience in the county and municipal highway field. Krejci is a graduate of UW-Platteville and is currently serving as president of the Wisconsin County Highway Association.

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Fixing Wisconsin Farm Roads

Photos by Pepin County Highway Department

By Tim Fiocchi, Senior Director of Government Relations, Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation and Gov. Tony Evers recently announced the recipients of the first \$50 million of grants from the state's new Agricultural Road Improvement Program (ARIP) for projects in 28 counties. These projects will upgrade roads that collectively carry more than 10.8 billion pounds of agricultural goods each year from farms and forestry operations with a \$1.6 billion annual impact on Wisconsin's economy.

The program will eventually award \$150 million in one-time grants to help rebuild our local roads. Local governments receiving the grants can expect to have 90 percent of the costs for their projects funded by ARIP dollars.

The first mile of road used by farmers to get their products to market has long been one of the biggest

challenges in the state's transportation system. For years, cash-strapped local governments have struggled to maintain a crumbling infrastructure that is becoming more antiquated, particularly in rural areas. As a result, local governments increasingly place weight restrictions on how and when farm equipment can be used.

Meanwhile, faced with competition from across the country and around the world, Wisconsin farmers have invested in modern (often larger and heavier) equipment and trucks to improve the efficiency of their operations. However, when a road weight restriction requires them to use alternative routes or run multiple trips with lighter loads, it impacts fuel, labor, and wear on equipment as well as potentially delays planting and fertilizing, which can substantially hinder the fall yield.

Ongoing driver shortages, higher fuel and other



These projects will upgrade roads that collectively carry more than 10.8 billion pounds of agricultural goods each year from farms and forestry operations with a \$1.6 billion annual impact on Wisconsin's economy.

input prices, and wide fluctuations in commodity prices compound these long-standing challenges. Felt first in farm county, the entire food supply chain feels the impact, driving up prices for everyone.

Most causes of inflation are beyond our control at the state and local levels, but we can impact the hidden costs of deficient rural infrastructure. Supported by broad, bipartisan support, the state Legislature, led by state Senators Howard Marklein (R-Spring Green), Cory Tomczyk (R-Mosinee) and Joan Ballweg (R-Markesan), and state Representatives Travis Tranel (R-Cuba City) and Nancy VanderMeer (R-Tomah), created the ARIP program to preserve and maintain Wisconsin's critical roads.

WisDOT received \$260 million in applications for the first round of grants — over five times the amount of initial funding available — clearly demonstrating the need for the program. Applications for the second round of grants were due September 30.

Priority for awarding ARIP grants is being given to projects that:

- Provide the greatest positive economic impact

- Provide access to the largest number of farmers or volume of agricultural goods
- Improve the only practicable access to a farm field or facility
- Result in the reduction of trips, costs, and mileage driven for farmers

Agriculture contributes \$104.8 billion to Wisconsin's economy annually and employs 475,000 residents. The ARIP program represents a crucial investment in Wisconsin's agricultural future and the state's broader economy. By revitalizing rural infrastructure, we enhance farmers' economic efficiency and shore up our food supply chain. As we look ahead, continued support for programs like ARIP is essential to maintaining Wisconsin's economy and our competitive edge in agriculture. ■

Tim Fiocchi is the senior director of government relations for the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, the state's largest general farm organization representing farms of different sizes, commodities and management styles. He can be reached at tfiocchi@wfbf.com.



Crew at a bridge in Eau Claire County.

Photo credit: Patrick Vander Sanden, Wisconsin County Highway Association



Highway Departments Focus on Smaller Bridges and Culverts

By Patrick Vander Sanden, Executive Director, Wisconsin County Highway Association

Your county highway departments are, as usual, hard at work getting things done in 2024. As the weather turns cooler, the orange cones and yellow vests are still out in full force as county crews rehab roads, manage stormwater and rights-of-way, and ensure bridges are safe.

This year, “smaller” bridges and culverts have been front of mind for the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and our local public works and highway personnel as they work to implement the Local Structure 6-20 feet program created in the 2023-25 Wisconsin State Budget.

Traditionally, the state has not quantified the number and condition of bridges and culverts under 20 feet. Vital for safe travel, many structures of this size are aging. They are repaired when found to be deficient, but Wisconsin needs a sustainable way to ensure they remain in good condition. Developing a longer-term, smaller structure program starts by assessing what we have, reviewing the data, and seeking the needed resources.



Why structures between six and 20 feet? The current federal bridge program provides funding for the maintenance and repair of structures more than 20 feet long. Under the state Highway Structures Information System, larger bridges are meticulously documented and monitored for maintenance, rehabilitation or reconstruction. For structures less than 20 feet, there is a prevalence of bridges and culverts in the 6-to-20-foot range, many of which are believed to be in poor condition.

Because the state hasn’t accounted for these smaller structures, local government organizations worked together to convince the state Legislature and governor to green-light the Local Structure 6-20 feet program with



Patrick Vander Sanden

Continued on page 20



Developing a longer-term, smaller structure program

starts by assessing what we have, reviewing the data, and seeking the needed resources.



Continued from page 19

the intent of verifying the number of the structures, their condition and the need for state funding.

When public transportation issues crop up — whether to complete projects, maintain systems or accumulate data, counties are counted on to get the job done. In the case of the Local Structure 6-20 feet program, we've taken the lead. The program involves two phases. First, local officials are creating an inventory of all their bridges and culverts within the 6-to-20-foot classification by the end of this

year. The state's certified bridge inspectors will assess the condition of the structures to determine the overall need to rebuild or repair them by the end of 2025.

County highway commissioners have been busy with this program as they direct their staff and consultants to undertake the inventory phase of their county-system structures. Some have moved to the inspection phase, knowing that a clear count of the structures and a solid condition report will be critical for future planning. County highway departments have also been called on to be the link for local governments between town, city and village structures and the state's Highway Structures Information System.

As the data on these structures comes in, we strongly believe there will be compelling evidence to present to the Legislature about the needs and resources required to ensure we are keeping our roadways as safe as possible. At the very least, counties and local governments in Wisconsin will have a valuable resource about the structures in their jurisdiction.

The Wisconsin County Highway Association appreciates the work and leadership of the Wisconsin Counties Association and their guidance in this endeavor. Our two groups have worked together, alongside our local government partners, to get this program up and running. Even though there have been some unexpected challenges, highway departments, as a vital part of Wisconsin counties, will get the job done on this important work. ■

Patrick Vander Sanden is the executive director of the Wisconsin County Highway Association (WCHA), the statewide association of Wisconsin county highway commissioners, their staffs, and companies that support their efforts in keeping Wisconsin public infrastructure safe and effective for individual and business travel in our state.

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Public Transit Drives Economic Development

Simplifying transit fares across Wisconsin to help connect workers to jobs

By Denise Wandke, President and Managing Director, Milwaukee County Transit System

Several years ago, Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley and the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) began brainstorming ways to simplify travel across the region. In conversations with neighboring transit systems and municipal leaders about workforce development, connecting workers to jobs stood out as an ongoing concern.

Annual ridership research indicates the number one reason riders use public transit is to travel to and from work. What if technology could more easily connect riders to work options between counties in the southeastern

Wisconsin region? Ultimately, the team embraced the idea to modernize its fare collection system and help riders plan, track and pay for rides across multiple transit systems.

That idea became a reality when it was time to upgrade the MCTS's existing fare collection system. After completing an extensive, nationwide request for proposal



Denise Wandke



process, Umo Mobility, a division of Cubic Corporation, was selected. Their technology offers scalability to accommodate many transit agencies on one platform.

Since MCTS was the first agency to onboard the new fare collection system, it would have been easy to lean into creating a brand name that evoked the Milwaukee area. However, the team had a much larger goal in mind — to expand and connect transit agencies across Wisconsin with one mobile app. With that goal, the app was branded as “WisGo.”

► How WisGo works

The user-friendly fare collection system includes the WisGo app and card, which allow users to manage their accounts and add funds via an online portal. In addition, transit users can purchase tickets for single rides at select retailers, transit system offices, and ticket vending



machines using cash or credit cards; or with cash on buses on all MCTS fixed routes except the Bus Rapid Transit line.

Both the mobile app and WisGo fare card are account-based and integrate with on- and off-board bus validators and ticket vending machines.

The new system also increases equity by capping fares. Once riders reach a set number of rides per day, week or month, all subsequent rides are free.

► Improving connections to jobs and education

Within six months of the launch, 85% of riders converted to the new WisGo mobile app platform. In the first year, MCTS achieved 170,000 app downloads and distributed thousands of WisGo cards through transit stations and retailer networks. Waukesha Metro was the first transit agency to join the WisGo partnership in fall 2023. Through this collaboration,

Continued on page 24





Continued from page 23

Waukesha Metro riders have access to seven additional retail locations to load their WisGo transit card and benefit from fare capping across both counties, making it a seamless experience for workers traveling between counties.

MCTS has realized success rolling out WisGo to businesses whose employees commute by bus. To date, 45 clients with over 1,300 employees participate, providing both the employer and employee safe and reliable transportation. More than 40,000 university students use a similar program, UPASS, to get to class.



Your local municipality can use the “#SaveTheBus” web page

as a guide to build transit advocacy in your area. Visit ridemcts.com/savethebus to find out all the ways you can advocate for transit funding.

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Even public schools have benefited from giving students prepaid WisGo cards when they need rides to school or home from after-school activities.

MCTS also helps riders in Milwaukee County connect to employers in Waukesha County. Specifically, the MCTS CONNECT 1 Bus Rapid Transit line was designed so riders can easily connect to Waukesha Metro's Route 1 at the Milwaukee Regional Medical Center. Ridership has increased 15% over the first year of operation in 2023.

► More transit systems onboarding WisGo

Beloit Transit, Ryde Racine and Oshkosh GO Transit have joined MCTS and Waukesha Metro in introducing the technology to their communities. Building word-of-mouth momentum among other Wisconsin transit agencies raises public transit's collective profile among elected officials, who are critical to supporting long-term, sustainable public transit funding.

By modernizing fare collection, counties across the state are taking a bigger picture look at public transit and workforce development and it's paying off.

► How you can help #SaveTheBus

Milwaukee County and public transit agencies throughout the state need advocates to secure sustainable transit funding in the future. Because quality public transportation enhances the quality of life in communities big and small, it's important to maintain reliable transit service to help workers access jobs and help seniors and veterans get to

medical appointments and the grocery store. Your local municipality can use the “#SaveTheBus” web page as a guide to build transit advocacy in your area. Visit ridemcts.com/savethebus to find out all the ways you can advocate for transit funding. ■

Denise Wandke is the president and managing director for the Milwaukee County Transit System.

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Demand Exceeds Specialized Transportation Funds

By Carissa Pagel-Smith, Aging & Disability Resource Center Manager, La Crosse County Human Services Department

Despite a growing need for services, the state appropriation for specialized transportation services for older adults and individuals with disabilities has not increased in five years. As a result, demand is outpacing funding, forcing many programs to cut services, limit rides or deny transportation altogether.

Under Chapter 85.21 of state statutes, the state provides financial assistance to counties for transportation services for older adults and individuals with disabilities based on population estimates. The program aims to help maintain the dignity and independence of individuals who would not otherwise have an available or accessible method of transportation. Counties can use the funds to provide, purchase, or coordinate services; buy equipment; or subsidize passenger costs. In La Crosse County, the Aging & Disability Resource Center (ADRC) primarily uses the funds to purchase transportation services from an established private provider.

Over the last five years, the ADRC of La Crosse County has experienced a nearly 40% growth in ridership, resulting in an 86% growth in expenses paid to the private transportation provider. An increase in rides to and from medical appointments, including dialysis, is a major component of the increase. Ridership is projected to grow



an additional 18% by year-end, resulting in an expected budget overspend of \$170,000 for 2024.

To manage costs, the ADRC has restricted the number of rides available to nursing home residents for the past two years. Additional strategies to manage and reduce costs may be required given the continued growth in ridership. This could include limitations on the number of rides offered and the elimination of services for certain residents unless alternative solutions can be found.

For many older adults and individuals with disabilities, these specialized transportation services are their only reliable means of mobility to maintain their independence, access health care, and participate in community life. Reducing or denying services can significantly impact their quality of life, leading to increased isolation, difficulty getting the proper care, and reduced access to social and recreational activities. ■

Carissa Pagel-Smith is the Aging & Disability Resource Center manager in the La Crosse County Human Services Department.



Carissa Pagel-Smith



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Bringing the Economic Benefits of Transportation Home

By Debby Jackson, Executive Director, Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin

Taylor County CTH D

Transportation is the key to unlocking economic development. It facilitates trade, boosts productivity, supports regional cooperation, and creates opportunities for investment and job creation.

If asked about the connection between transportation and economic growth, I think most people would say that, of course, transportation and the ability to efficiently move people and goods is essential to the

economy. It's a given; something everyone appreciates. They would make that declarative statement, and then go on with their day and not think about it again.

From the moment we get up in the morning to the time we go to bed, transportation shapes our world. The buildings in which we live and work, the dozens of products we use daily, electricity, the freedom of mobility, and so much more wouldn't be possible without transportation. It is



Candidates, policymakers and the public

need to understand the benefits of individual projects and grasp what makes these investments possible.

such a presence in our lives that we often don't see it.

Most people take our transportation system for granted — it has always been there and always will be.

That is the disconnect and our challenge.

Those of us involved in local government or policy know that good transportation doesn't just happen. Wisconsin's massive transportation system requires constant planning, investment and maintenance. In recent years, we have made progress in stabilizing system conditions. But without constant vigilance, it would be easy to lose momentum and put all our gains at risk.

So, how do we bridge the high-level conceptual understanding with the impact of real-world decisions?

We break it down into more digestible bites. It is not about the election-year deluge of planning, ribbon-cutting and grant-making announcements. Candidates, policymakers and the public need to

Continued on page 30



WISCONSIN'S TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

104,000
miles



of county highways, town roads, municipal streets

12,000 miles



of state and interstate highways



81

public transit and shared-ride taxi systems

8



commercial service airports and

90

diverse general aviation (GA) public-use airports

3,300 miles



of railroad tracks

29



commercial ports



Continued from page 29

understand the benefits of individual projects and grasp what makes these investments possible.

We tell stories of farmers benefiting from the removal of weight restrictions on local roads and bridges. We share examples of employers using public transportation to broaden their labor pools. We explain how a long-standing need negatively impacts a community. Instead of asking the public to contemplate a transportation system of unimaginable complexity, we help them to think about transportation as a way to support a major employer in their town and a neighbor who works there.

By sharing specifics, people will make connections to their own communities and lives.

To highlight specific projects that keep Wisconsin's economy moving, the TDA launched a new messaging endeavor, TDA Spotlight. Its short, easy-to-read posts are ready-made for sharing on social media platforms.

We've already featured a variety of projects — freight rail, passenger rail, transit, ports, roads, and highways — and will continue to do so through next year. (See page 32 for examples of Spotlight posts.)

We also made it easy for you to contribute examples from your community by launching a user-friendly portal available on TDA's website home page, TDAWisconsin.org, and at the bottom of TDA Spotlight.org. From there, you can upload an image and a few basic details. The TDA team will write a short narrative capturing the significance of the projects in your part of the state. Let TDA help you tell your story!

Together, we can bring to the forefront all the ways transportation moves Wisconsin forward. ■

Debby Jackson is the executive director of the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin.

Continued on page 32

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Continued from page 30



TDA Spotlight puts the focus on specific transportation projects in Wisconsin to help build the public's awareness of the complexity of the state's transportation system, its impact on residents, and the need for appropriate funding.

LRIP strengthens Taylor County's logging industry

County Highway D is critical for the logging industry — Taylor County's top employer — and tourism in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. It is one of two county highways that connect State Highways 13 and 73 to the forest. Unfortunately, CTH D was experiencing rapid deterioration of its asphalt, with the existing pavement raveling in the wheel ruts. As a result, water pooled on the surface, increasing its aggregate base penetration and continuing the deterioration cycle. With this road's heavy truck traffic volume, Taylor County needed to address the road's condition. Like many Wisconsin rural counties, Taylor County's budget struggles to keep up with inflation. The county funds its roads on a 44-year life cycle, but this 26-year-old road needed a major facelift.

Visit TDA Spotlight.org for the rest of the story.

Pepin County couldn't afford to upgrade CTH R, support local producers without ARIP

County Highway R provides access to three of Pepin County's most significant agricultural producers, with estimated annual sales of \$24 million. To protect the county taxpayer investments, most county and town roads in Pepin County are subject to spring weight restrictions, lasting about six weeks, including CTH R. These weight restrictions cause hardship for farmers and agricultural producers as additional trips at reduced weights lead to additional labor, fuel, mileage, and other costs. If weight restrictions affect the timing of manure and fertilizer applications, the result can be lower crop yields and lost revenue.

Read more on TDA Spotlight.org.

.....

Visit TDAWisconsin.org or TDA Spotlight.org to contribute examples from your community.

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The winning photograph of the 2024 Discover Wisconsin calendar photo contest by Michael Leis — “Dells Mill, Eau Claire County”

ON THE COVER:

Meet the Photographer

Each year, Discover Wisconsin, the nation's longest-running tourism TV show and the state's leading media brand, partners up with the Wisconsin Counties Association to conduct a photo contest through social media. Thousands of people enter their best Wisconsin photos and the Discover Wisconsin crew chooses 12 winners to be featured in their annual calendar — one of which will be featured on the calendar cover and a cover of the Wisconsin Counties magazine.

The winning photo of the 2024 calendar's cover spot features a beautiful fall day at Dells Mill in Eau Claire County. The photo was taken by Michael Leis and was chosen from more than 1,000 entries. We got to know him



a little bit, learning about his life in Wisconsin and how he captured this winning photo.

► Can you give us the backstory of how you captured the photograph?

Michael Leis: The Packers had a late game that day. So, my wife and I decided to catch some fall colors near Holcombe. On our way, we noticed a sign for Dells Mill. It looked interesting so we stopped. It's tough getting a good drone photo there because of the trees and other obstacles.

► How did you get involved in photography?

ML: I liked aerial photography when I was actively flying Cessna and Piper aircraft. Then in 2018, I saw a video

on drone photography. I bought a Phantom 4 Pro drone and flew it on our farm for a year. I now know what the numbers stand for on my camera settings. But I still fall back on just adjusting my camera to what looks good.

► **What's your connection to Wisconsin?**

ML: I grew up in the Driftless Region near Cashton. My wife and I live on the farm I grew up on.

► **What makes Wisconsin such a wonderful photography location and subject?**

ML: Diversity. The Driftless Region is full of hills, coulees

and streams. In the last few years, we've driven to the north woods during the fall foliage season for a few days. The eastern part of the state has the lakefront. You just can't beat that kind of scenery!

► **Do you have any favorite Wisconsin memories?**

ML: The drought of 1988. We didn't have many crops to harvest on the farm but we did have time. We took our kids to Wisconsin Dells and other area swimming pools once a week. Also, we went to our first Packers training camp in 1996 and have gone back almost every year since. ■

WINNING 2024 PHOTOS FROM THE DISCOVER WISCONSIN ANNUAL PHOTO CONTEST



Kim Hoholek, Janesville, Rock County



John Gardner, Pewaukee, Waukesha County



Brad Bellisle, Jacksonport, Door County



David Enrique Lopez, Seymour, Outagamie County



Elaina Brossman, Lake Delton, Sauk County



Jan Favret, Necedah, Juneau County



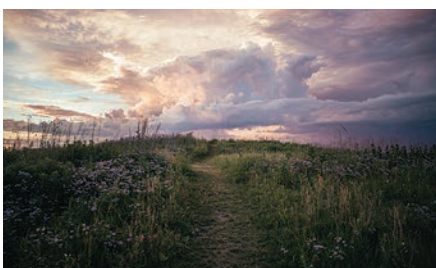
Michael Henderson, Two Rivers, Manitowoc County



Amy Nigon, Greenwood, Clark County



Sharon Olk, Wausau, Marathon County



Brandy Pruitt, Wauwatosa, Milwaukee County



Eric O'Dell, Ridgeway, Iowa County



Michael Leis, Augusta, Eau Claire County



2024 Scholarship Recipients

By Robyn Voss, Government Affairs & Project Manager, Wisconsin Counties Association

Without a doubt, college costs can be daunting, with students sometimes working numerous jobs to make their diploma dreams a reality. To help lessen the financial impact, the Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation has awarded five \$2,500 scholarships and the WCA Group Health Trust has awarded five \$2,000 scholarships.

These scholarship programs, created



Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation

17 and 16 years ago respectively, give back to the members who work incredibly hard to keep Wisconsin counties, municipalities and school districts running smoothly.

“Congratulations to this year’s scholarship winners,”

said Michael Lamont, assistant secretary of County Mutual and chief operating officer of GHT. “We know tuition costs can be hefty, so we are extremely happy to

WISCONSIN COUNTY MUTUAL INSURANCE CORPORATION SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

County Mutual, which insures over 50 Wisconsin counties, has awarded more than \$100,000 in scholarships since its scholarship program began in 2007. This year, County Mutual received almost 100 applications. Congratulations to the winners!



CORA KLEIST is the daughter of Stacy Kleist, the Richland County clerk of circuit court. Cora is attending UW-Madison, pursuing a degree in animal science and life science

communications. “Looking ahead, my primary goal is to contribute to the development of sustainable agricultural practices while fostering economic growth within rural communities.”



ALISON STUMPF is entering her sophomore year at UW-Madison, working toward a degree in social work and Spanish. Alison is the daughter of Heath Stumpf, a master

electrician with Winnebago County. “My dream job is to be a licensed clinical social worker and work as a mental health clinician, providing therapy and counseling resources to various groups of people. Being bilingual will allow me to communicate with more individuals and provide resources to uplift marginalized communities, something I am extremely passionate about.”



BROGAN KORGER is the son of Trempealeau County 911 dispatcher Stacia Korger. Brogan is entering his first year at UW-Madison and will be studying biochemistry. When

Brogan graduates, he plans to work in the medical field. “I do not know yet if my career path will be in the form of becoming a physician, surgeon, pediatrician, medical researcher or even a mental health clinician. What I do know is that I can improve society by offering care to those who need it.”



ALEDA SCHULTZ is attending UW-Madison, working towards a degree in biology and Spanish. Aleda’s mom, Heather Schultz, is the chief medical examiner for Portage

County. “I am planning on double majoring in biology and Spanish...and I expect to go to graduate school or medical school. I would love to use Spanish in my job to make patients whose primary language is Spanish feel more comfortable.”



MADELINE WOJCHIK is attending UW-Stevens Point, working towards a bachelor’s degree in communication sciences and disorders. She is the daughter of Carrie Nelson-

Wojchik, the Portage County assistant human resources director. Madeline plans to pursue a master’s degree in speech-language pathology. “I want a career that allows me to teach others and make a positive impact on their self-confidence. With this in mind, I am working towards becoming either a school or medical speech-language pathologist.” □

“Congratulations to all recipients of this year’s scholarships and best of luck to all students as they continue their studies. We are excited to see the powerful impact these young individuals will make on Wisconsin going forward.”

— Michael Lamont, assistant secretary of County Mutual and chief operating officer of GHT

present these 10 outstanding scholars each with a check that will assist with the cost of their education.”

To qualify for a scholarship, the applicants must be enrolled in a full-time undergraduate course of study at an accredited two- or four-year Wisconsin college no later than the fall of 2024. The applicant or the applicant’s spouse, parent, grandparent, or guardian must be an employee

of a County Mutual or GHT member.

An independent panel of educators selected the scholarship recipients based on scores in five categories:

future goals and career plans, grade point average, community involvement, the quality of the written essay, and a letter of recommendation ■



WCA GROUP HEALTH TRUST SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

GHT received over 30 applicants for this more industry-focused scholarship program. The applicants must be majoring in the health care field, which can range from a certified nursing assistant to physical therapy. The 2024 winners are:



BREANNA BASTIAN is starting her first year at Carroll University, majoring in nursing. Breanna is the daughter of Outagamie County GIS/land information manager, Brian Bastian. Breanna plans to work as a registered nurse. “Right now, my mind is set on working in a neonatal intensive care unit or pediatrics, but this could change. I am aware of the challenges that lie ahead, but I am determined to overcome them through continuous learning and growth.”



MARAH GRUEN is the daughter of Sarah Gruen, a teacher with the Royall School District. Marah is beginning her first year at UW-Eau Claire, majoring in nursing. She plans to become a nurse practitioner in pediatrics. “Working in the medical field has always been a dream of mine. I want to be a nurse because I have an indescribable desire to help those in need.”



KARA THIMMIG is attending Concordia University, majoring in nursing. Kara is the daughter of Todd Thimmig, a Sheboygan County maintenance technician. Kara plans to work in emergency medicine or specialize in critical care. “Growing up, I witnessed nurses’ incredible impact on my

family during challenging times. Their kindness, expertise, and dedication inspired me to pursue a career in nursing. I want to make that same difference.”



NORA WIESMAN is the daughter of Shawano School District nurse Jessica Wiesman. Nora is a second-generation Bellin College student and a radiologic sciences major. She plans to specialize in mammography. “I picture my future filled with growth and opportunity to learn more about this field. My career aspiration in radiology has stemmed from a long-term interest in health care, and a strong desire to help patients to the best of my ability.”



HEATHER YOUNG is entering her freshman year at Carroll University and is a physical therapy major. Heather is the daughter of Gail Young, an Ozaukee County office assistant. Heather plans to further her education and graduate with a doctorate in physical therapy. “My interest in physical therapy began during my freshman year of high school when I fractured my right tibia, ankle and four vertebrae in a fall.” □



SAVE THE DATES FOR THE REMAINING 2024 WEBINARS:

- November 27
- December 18

New! County Board Rules Template

Join us for the October installment of “In the Board Room” to learn about a new WCA “Board Rules Template.” To aid county boards and corporation counsel with drafting, updating and reviewing their board rules, the WCA and Attolles Law have created a template to serve as a starting point. The template is based on the numerous questions the WCA and Attolles Law have received over the years as well as recent, in-depth work with

Richland County. At the “In the Board Room” webinar on Wednesday, Oct. 23 at 12 p.m., the presenters will review the template and how boards can use it to customize their rules.

To attend the live webinars, pre-registration is required at bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom24 to receive the webinar link. There is no cost to register. The webinars are recorded and posted on the WCA website at wicounties.org. ■

2024 ALERT Law Enforcement Grant Program Applications Due Oct. 11

To support its member law enforcement agencies’ efforts in risk management, the Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation is offering \$30,000 in grants for training, equipment, community awareness campaigns and other programs through the ALERT Law Enforcement Grants program.

Grantees must hold an active County Mutual general liability insurance policy when applying and meet the statutory definition of a “law enforcement agency.”

For details and a link to the application, visit wisconsincountymutual.org. Applications are due Friday, Oct. 11 at 4:30 p.m.

U.S. Senate Debate Oct. 18

The Wisconsin Broadcasters Association Foundation Board is continuing its 34-year tradition of holding statewide televised debates for Wisconsin’s voters by airing a general election debate in the 2024 Wisconsin U.S. Senate race.

The qualifying U.S. Senate candidates — Democratic U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin and Republican Senate candidate Eric Hovde — agreed to participate in a debate on Friday, Oct. 18 at 7 p.m., hosted by WMTV-TV in Madison. Radio and television stations from across Wisconsin will participate in the production of the debate.

The hour-long debate will be made available to radio and television stations throughout Wisconsin for live or delayed broadcast. The WCA is sponsoring the debate. ■

Operation Green Light for Veterans, Nov. 4-11

America's counties have a long and proud history of serving our nation's veterans, a legacy that continues as counties work with federal, state and local partners to ensure our former service members have access to the resources they need to thrive.



Waushara County Courthouse

To honor our veterans, the National Association of Counties and the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers again invite the nation's 3,069 counties, parishes, and boroughs to join Operation Green Light and show support for veterans by lighting their buildings green the week of Veteran's Day, Nov. 4-11, 2024. By shining a green light, county governments and our residents will let veterans know they are seen, appreciated and supported.

More information, including a template resolution declaring a county's participation in Operation Green Light, is available at naco.org/program/operation-green-light-veterans.

RECORDED WCA WEBINARS Missed the recent WCA webinars on mental health services and the sale of tax-foreclosed properties? To access the recordings, slide decks and other background material, visit wicounties.org and select "Past Event Materials" under the "Events" tab.

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CALUMET COUNTY

Coffee Roasting and Ice Cream Making: Partners Behind Terra Verde's Coffeehouse and Scoops Ice Cream

Dropping his kids at daycare one morning, Marko Sosa saw a woman sipping a latte. Always in search of the perfect cup of coffee, Marko asked where she got it. “A coffeehouse 10 miles away” was the response.

The idea of following his dream and opening a coffeehouse in his adopted hometown of Chilton in Calumet County was born in that moment. No long drive would be needed and only the purest of products would be sold.

“The name of our company is Terra Verde, which means green earth,” said Marko. “The coffee must be of the highest quality possible, and it must be organic. It must be socially and economically sustainable in every part of the world we are getting coffee from. I don’t want to buy coffee from a grower who is enriching his pockets. I want to buy coffee from a grower who is going to make himself sustainable, as well as the community they live in. It goes hand in hand.”

Originally from Honduras, Marko, and his wife Melissa, a transplant from New Orleans, quickly found that their



By Michelle Gormican Thompson,
WCA Communications

Terra Verde was not only a place to have a wonderful cup of coffee but also an important community gathering place. So, when an opportunity came up to purchase Scoops Ice Cream and expand their offerings, they jumped at the chance.

As with Terra Verde, quality and care go into every product made. “We go through 400 gallons of cream a week and I’m pumping 90 gallons a day of ice cream,” said Melissa, who makes all the product. “I’m very critical of the fact that the dairy must come from our state. I know it’s pricey to get, but quality is a must. We have no artificial flavors or food colorings, only whole milk and no high fructose corn syrup. It is the highest quality we can make.”

Whether it’s coffee or ice cream, one thing is for certain, Marko and Melissa are an important part of their community and value their neighbors. “Our customers have built this place from the very beginning. A table, a shelf, an old coffee cup. It’s the people’s place,” said Marko. “It’s a beautiful town and we love it here.” □

► WATCH NOW: bit.ly/uniquely-terra-verde



OCONTO COUNTY

Roaring Engines and Rising Stars: Off-Road Racing at Wisconsin's Dirt City Motorplex

In Lena, a small community in every sense of the word, you'll find anything but quiet at Dirt City Motorplex. This off-road, racing short track in Oconto County is a place for fast cars and passionate people.

"There's a lot of racers who live within this area and race on the off-road racing circuit. We felt it would be great to bring something to our hometown," said Jodi Marquardt, director of Dirt City Motorplex. "We are all passionate about it and thought 'Why not have our own track, why not grow our mission and our ideas?' It's been a fun ride."

Six years ago, the community came together to build Dirt City in an amazing six months.

"We started in the fall building the track from nothing, it was a hayfield," said Jodi. "We built it into the complex it

is today and had our first race in the spring. That's because of the hard work and efforts of the people involved in it."

"It's a track built by racers for racers," said Tyson Marquardt, who along with his brother Dylan, has been racing there for five years. "We come here a lot to work on the track with my dad and his buddies."

Jodi is quick to point out that Lena, a village of 560 people, has over 300 volunteers who come out on race day to make things happen.

"Our people are doers, and everyone lends a hand, from kids to adults," said Jodi. "This is a strong community. It's a small town with a big heart." □

► **WATCH NOW:** bit.ly/uniquely-dirt-city

To see other Uniquely Wisconsin season three stories, as well as seasons one and two episodes, visit Discover Wisconsin's YouTube page at youtube.com/DiscoverWI and scroll down to the "Uniquely Wisconsin" section. You can also listen to "The Cabin" podcast, which features participating counties, on your favorite podcast player.

To learn more and join the Emmy Award-winning Uniquely Wisconsin brand, contact WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell at 866-404-2700 or Washington County Executive Josh Schoemann at 262-306-2200.

Counties Could Heal Dissatisfaction with Democracy

By Charlie Ban, County News Digital Editor & Senior Writer, National Association of Counties

When voter enthusiasm is waning and the national mood seems stuck in neutral, the United States is not alone.



users to be thoughtful in posting to social media.

“Build the connections now and those channels of communications before you really need them,” Wilson said.

Studies by the Pew Research Center over six years have indicated a multilateral dissatisfaction with representative democracy, from Canada and Germany to Kenya and Nigeria.

“This problem of distrust is not going to be solved at the national level,” Rachel Dean Wilson said during a July 14 summit — “Navigating Current Global Trends Across Western Democracies.” She’s the managing director of the German Marshall Fund’s Alliance for Securing Democracy and U.S. Elections.

When political tensions threaten to further divide Americans, it falls to county governments to build on connections and demonstrate a responsiveness that engenders trust and confidence.

“Each time we go through a crisis, we come out of it stronger,” said Mayor Jerry Demings of Orange County, Florida. “Right now, I think we’re in one of those defining moments in the history of our nation, where we’re polarized around political issues and the two-party system.”

The simple but challenging way for counties to build trust is not only by performing their roles effectively and reliably but by emphasizing transparency and demonstrating the public’s role in participatory democracy, panelists noted.

Wilson offered examples of national governments that spurred efforts leading to ground-up trust in democratic institutions, rather than taking heavy-handed, top-down approaches. By building relationships with community and civic organizations, Sweden develops the trust that leads residents to know how to find answers about elections and government. The Australian Election Commission launched a “stop and consider” campaign to encourage social media

Two county officials who have overseen elections detailed the outreach efforts they hoped would win over residents skeptical of a government function that has seen outsized attention and pressure from the public.

In South Dakota, Davison County’s auditor Susan Kiepke recruited her friends’ college-aged children to work a post-election audit, giving them experience and perspective to share with their peers and their parents.

“They were excited because they were in a new process and got to experience that firsthand,” she said.

Curtis Koch, auditor in Davis County, Utah, previously served as county clerk. He has invited the public to “election integrity nights,” where they could ask him and his staff any question, even questions that would otherwise be seen as offensive.

Despite some long nights and challenging talks, he saw them as “growing pains” toward a better understanding.

December Obligation Deadline for ARPA Funds

The obligation deadline for American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds is the end of this year. ARPA invested \$65.1 billion in direct aid to counties.

Counties must obligate these funds by Dec. 31, 2024, and fully expend them by Dec. 31, 2026.

NACo’s ARPA Resource Hub, available at bit.ly/ARPA_Hub, offers technical assistance, webinars, white papers and analysis. ■

“I walked away as an election official more educated about what the public was seeing [and] they walked away more educated. When we have follow-up conversations, even if they still didn’t have full faith and confidence, you could tell the education was there and we were talking on a higher level the next time,” he said.

In a decade that included three traumatic and destructive volcanic events, Hawaii County, Hawaii has challenged itself to win the confidence of its residents and did so by employing the local philanthropic community to expedite aid. The CHANGE grant program sought out organizations addressing various local aspects of the community — community and economy, health and wellness, arts and culture, natural environment, government and civics, and education. In doing so, Hawaii County Council member Sue Lee Loy said she hopes to be able to quickly demonstrate the county’s responsiveness to residents’ needs, and faster than the typical deliberative government pace.

“The best way to be prepared is to always be prepared to do it before, during, and after,” she said. “We found that our nonprofit agencies were the first that could mobilize quickly. They lived in the communities, they already stuck together, they all had a mission.”

Richard Wike, director of the Pew Global Attitudes Research division, said studies found Americans are often

more divided ideologically than others around the world, with higher levels that affect polarization.

“Not only do we disagree with the other side, but [people] don’t like people on the other side, you don’t want to live near them, you don’t want your children to marry people who are politically different from you,” he said.

That could result, he said, from the United States’ entrenched two-party system.

Charisse Phillips, a former U.S. Foreign Service officer, stressed the importance of emphasizing normalcy, both in terms of democratic processes and social mores, drawing a contrast to abnormal, antisocial behavior that can sow dissent.

“The important thing is to make sure people understand how the process is supposed to work – by underscoring our shared values, talking less about how polarized we are and more about what we have in common,” she said.

Wike noted that framing issues in a way that reminds people of our shared national identity as Americans can reduce some of these polarizations, particularly election officials who evoke patriotism.

“There’s experimental research, for example, to show you can reduce affective polarization [by] priming people to think about the 4th of July, the U.S. Olympic team or [other] things that bring us all together.” ■

Pima County, Ariz. Invests in Preschool

*By Meredith Moran, County News Junior Staff Writer, National Association of Counties
(Edited to fit space constraints. Read the full article at bit.ly/PimaPEEPS.)*

Quality early childhood education contributes to better outcomes in social development, health and employment, according to experts, but it comes at a price. The Pima County, Ariz. Board of Supervisors is investing in the future of its community, providing access to high-quality early education for children in families who can’t afford the \$800 a month on average it costs to send a child to preschool in the county.

The Pima Early Education Program Scholarships (PEEPS) program functions through a mixed-delivery system, offering free school district preschool classes, Quality First scholarships and extended-day Head Start programming for low-income and middle-class residents in the county. PEEPs served 1,923 children in the 2023-24 school year.

Investing in high-quality early education is “absolutely crucial,”

said Pima County Supervisor Rex Scott. His wife, who taught kindergarten, told him on numerous occasions that she could tell on the first day of the school year which of her kids had the benefit of going to preschool, he said.

Scott, who worked in Arizona schools for nearly 30 years himself, said PEEPS is “the most important expenditure in the county’s budget.”

“Well, Pima County is in charge of the jail, indigent care, workforce development — many of the programs that we have, are to help people because they don’t have the education, they weren’t successful in other programs. If we help young people get a stronger start from very early childhood, then they’re less likely to need these programs, statistically, so in the long run, this investment is going to reap dividends.”



LEGAL ISSUES

RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Electioneering Law and the Political Expression of County Officials and Employees

By Andy Phillips, Sarah Hanneman and Jake Apostolu, Attorneys, Attolles Law

Given the current volatility in national and local politics, and the wide-reaching implications of the upcoming fall elections, this election season could prove to be one of the most divisive in recent memory. Campaigning, engaging in political discourse, and open debate, are, of course, core tenets of our First Amendment rights to freedom of expression. However, the timing, manner and places in which those rights are exercised may be regulated to both minimize undue political coercion and maintain a productive business environment.

While most people focus on the candidates and hot-button issues, an equally important consideration for public officials and employees is whether they are engaging in prohibited “electioneering.” In addition, the manner in which county officials and employees express themselves politically at board meetings and at work must comply with relevant county ordinances, policies, and rules and state and federal laws. This article provides important information from Chapter 12 of the Wisconsin Statutes on “Prohibited Election Practices;” an overview of the regulation of political expression in county government; and “best practices” governing electioneering and political expression for counties.

► Electioneering 101

Wis. Stat. § 12.03(4) defines “electioneering” as, “any activity which is intended to influence voting at an election.” County officials and employees need to be mindful of these laws, and the guiding principles that stem from them, to ensure they do not run afoul of Wisconsin laws.

Election day and absentee voting period electioneering restrictions and penalties

In Wisconsin, no person may engage in electioneering at: (1) a polling place or on public property within 100 feet of an entrance to a polling place on election day; and (2) at a municipal clerk’s office or on public property within 100 feet of an entrance to the municipal clerk’s office during the period when absentee ballots can be cast. That is, on election day, and during the period when absentee ballots can be cast, Wisconsin law prohibits all persons from engaging in any activity intended to influence voting on public property near locations where ballots are cast.¹

Electioneering includes verbal campaigning and posting or distributing “election-related material” (i.e., any written material that describes, or claims to describe, voters’ rights or responsibilities, such as signs, banners, and literature).² A polling place, for purposes of Wisconsin law, includes any public property, the municipal clerk’s office while receiving absentee ballots, and even any nursing or qualified retirement home or community-based residential facility while special voting deputies are present at the home or facility. Essentially, anywhere voting actively occurs, campaigning should not.

Further, counties and their employees need to be aware that violation of Wisconsin’s electioneering laws can carry monetary penalties. Under Wis. Stat. § 12.60(1)(b), a violation of the prohibition on verbal campaigning within 100 feet of a polling place can result in a \$1,000 fine and up to six months in prison. Likewise, under Wis. Stat. § 12.60(1)(d), a violation

of the prohibition on posting or distributing election-related material can result in a \$100 fine.

Time off work for employees to vote or serve as election officials

Under Wis. Stat. § 12.07(1), all employers are required to allow employees to take time off work for voting. Other than a deduction for lost time, no penalties may be imposed on employees who take time off for voting. In addition, Wis. Stat. § 6.76 states that employees are entitled to up to three successive hours of time off work for voting while the polls are open, and employees are required to notify the employer before election day if they intend to be absent for voting. Employers are allowed to designate the specific time of day the employee may be absent, which gives counties the flexibility to stagger absences and ensure county operations are not unduly disrupted.

Additionally, under Wis. Stat. § 12.07(2), employers must allow employees time off to serve as election officials. Employers are prohibited from making any threats or inducements to attempt to prevent employees from serving as election officials.

Counties should ensure they have a written policy regarding voting absence and election official procedures. The policy should include instructions on who should be notified if a county employee intends to take time off for voting or to serve as an election official. The policy should also specify whether the deductions for lost time due to voting will be unpaid time or whether the county will allow employees to utilize an accrued leave to cover the absence.

► Day-to-day regulation of political expression in county government

Some states have explicit laws regulating political expression of county board members, the public and employees in county board meetings, but Wisconsin does not. This means that political expression at county board and committee meetings (as “open meetings”) is relatively unregulated unless a county enacts an ordinance, policy or rule governing attendee conduct. The same is true as it relates to the work environment — a county can adopt reasonable regulations through policy. However, any such ordinance, policy or rule must adhere to various constitutional standards.

Constitutional standards for rules and policies governing board meeting conduct and expression

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and Article I, Section III of the Wisconsin Constitution prohibit governmental actors from abridging citizens’ and elected officials’ freedom of speech. The U.S. Supreme Court consistently upholds the right of publicly elected officials and political candidates to express their political views, opinions, and positions, even if unpopular, during elections and other governmental processes. However, the context, or forum, in which such speech takes place determines the degree to which a county can regulate such speech. The Supreme Court recognizes three main forums of political expression, listed here in order of least regulable to most regulable: (1) traditional public forums, (2) limited public forums, and (3) non-public forums. County board and committee meetings where the public is allowed to comment or speak are considered limited public forums, which means they are locations or channels for communication that a county opens for expressive activity on a limited or permanent basis. A county can generally regulate the time, place and manner of speech that takes place in limited public forums.³

The public has no statutory or constitutional right to participate in a meeting of a governmental body, but board rules may provide a right to public comment, which can become a challenge to the orderly transaction of business and maintenance of order at any meeting, and especially when political tensions are high.⁴ To ensure that political campaigning or otherwise contentious comment does not detract from the matters at hand, counties can enact reasonable rules on the time, place and manner of attendees’ speech that are content/viewpoint neutral and do not discriminate based on the political cause or message advocated. Enacting content/viewpoint-neutral rules traditionally posed a challenge for counties that struggled to point to an existing legitimate governmental interest, aside from the ability to get business done at meetings. Fortunately, federal courts in the last 15 years have confirmed that a county’s interest in orderly meetings constitutes a “legitimate governmental interest.”⁵ In the same vein, rules surrounding decorum, debate and conduct at meetings are designed to provide for the orderly conduct of governmental business, period; as such, any rules surrounding such matters should be evenly applied to all meeting participants and attendees. Additionally, from an optics standpoint, it would not be appropriate to have different sets of rules for the public and board members.

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LEGAL ISSUES

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Obscene or disruptive political expression

During public comment, speakers can be silenced if they are disruptive or threatening, but there is some ambiguity in how courts view speech to be disruptive or threatening. In large part, the power of a board to prohibit obscenities or profanity at meetings is constrained to the terms of its local rules. However, an unpopular or polarizing political stance, in and of itself, is not obscene or disruptive per se. Therefore, county boards should exercise caution in how board rules treat differing political ideas and err on the side of broad prohibitions, as they are content-neutral and easier to administer.

Regulating campaign and election-related issues in the workplace

Aside from political expression at county board and committee meetings, counties also need to be cognizant of regulating employee speech as an employer. In large part, there is less red tape around the county's right to regulate speech in county-owned, employment-related facilities as these are considered "non-public forums." Workspaces are settings in which public speech is not traditionally invited, nor did the government express any intention of inviting speech. Examples include offices of county officials and employees and county-owned spaces maintained for conducting or facilitating government business. Rules governing employee speech in these non-public forums must only bear a rational relationship to a legitimate governmental interest.

To the extent possible, and subject to local county policies, ordinances, and rules for employee conduct, work-related activity should remain separate from personal or political activity. Campaigning, for example, is not a work-related activity, even though elected officials are an integral part of the county workplace. County employees should also refrain from using county facilities for campaigning purposes, such as using county property (e.g., computers and printers) for the creation and dissemination of campaign-related materials.

The importance of written rules

Whether regulating the public's speech and expression at a board or committee meeting or regulating an employee's speech and expression, it is important for

counties to have written rules (in ordinance or otherwise) that embody the regulations. For board and committee meetings, the regulations can be placed in the county board rules. If the rules limit public comment, those specific limitations should be communicated to the public to set expectations for what is appropriate speech and conduct. Employment regulations should be contained within the county's employee handbook or personnel policies. Again, establishing expectations sometimes leads to preventing issues from occurring.

The written regulations serve two purposes. First, they allow even-handed enforcement and provide a clear guide as to prohibited speech or conduct. Next, the formation of the regulations will lead to robust discussion on what should or should not be allowed in certain circumstances. In all cases, these discussions must include corporation counsel to ensure the regulations would withstand constitutional scrutiny.

Counties must be mindful of the constitutional implications of regulating speech and expression. Beyond the threat of legal action, nobody should want to be accused of violating an individual's First Amendment privileges. Counties should work closely with corporation counsel to ensure any such regulations are narrow and commonly recognized as reasonable to withstand judicial scrutiny. If you have any questions about electioneering or political expression matters in your county, or would like additional information, contact the WCA or any member of Attolles Law, s.c. ■

Attolles Law, s.c. works on behalf of Wisconsin counties, school districts and other public entities across the state of Wisconsin. Its president & CEO, Andy Phillips, has served as outside general counsel for the Wisconsin Counties Association for nearly 20 years.

1. Wis. Stat. § 12.03(2)(a)2.
2. Wis. Stat. § 12.035(1).
3. City of Madison Joint School Dist. v. Wisconsin Employment Relations Comm'n, 429 U.S. 167 [1976].
4. Perry Educ. Ass'n v. Perry Local Educators' Ass'n, 460 U.S. 37, 103 S. Ct. 948, 74 L.Ed.2d 794 [1983].
5. See Steinburg v. Chesterfield Cty. Planning Comm'n, 527 F. 3d 377, 385 [4th Cir. 2008] (holding that "imposing restrictions to preserve civility and decorum [are] necessary to further the forum's [i.e., board's] purpose of conducting public business").



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