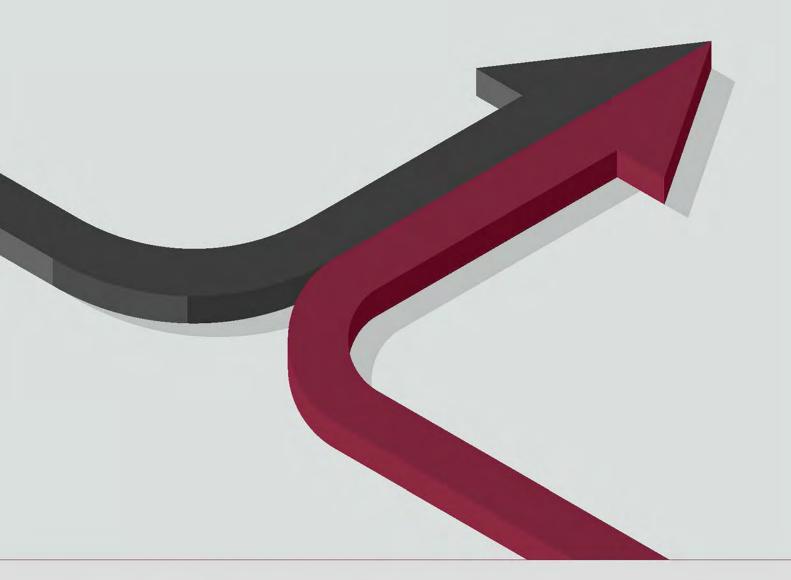
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## LET'S GO to the Fair

Exploring the tradition and future of Wisconsin county fairs

ALSO: Al in Action, Part 1 | Wood County Prioritizes Public Health



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## Counties

JUNE 2025 Volume 89, Number 6

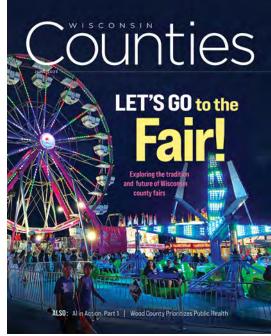


Photo courtesy of the Waukesha County Fair

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#### From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

/ President & CEO

### Join Us for Inaugural Local Government Summit on June 19

ithout a doubt, the landscape of public service is shifting. We see this in emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, changing demographics, and evolving cybersecurity threats that are reshaping how we govern and serve our constituents.

Many opportunities lie within these changes. Increases in collaboration, as seen recently in the state's shared revenue reforms, demonstrate that meaningful progress continues to happen for our local governments.

It is within that spirit of partnership that we see groups such as the Local Government Institute of Wisconsin emerge, grow and thrive. The LGI, a collaboration between the WCA, the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, and the Wisconsin Towns Association, works to find solutions to challenges and demonstrate strength in a unified, local voice.

We are proud to be a part of the LGI, which serves as a hub for knowledge sharing, best practices, and collaboration among local government professionals and stakeholders. Its work focuses on fostering discussions, providing resources, and driving strategic initiatives that strengthen local governance.

In this vein, we are excited to be a part of the inaugural Local Government Summit, which will continue these important conversations and tackle tough topics facing Wisconsin's counties and other local units of government.

Hosted by the LGI on Thursday, June 19, at the Fox Cities Exhibition Center in Appleton, the summit will bring together elected officials, administrators, department heads, and staff to address today's challenges and tomorrow's opportunities, providing a forum for conversation and networking opportunities.

The event will focus on artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and civic engagement, with discussions led by thought leaders and subject matter experts.

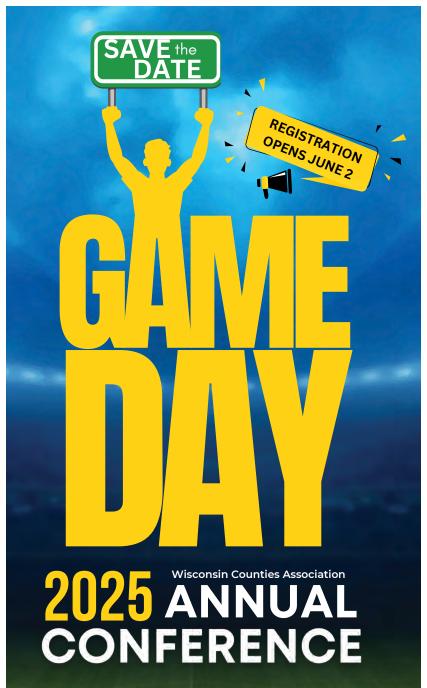
Cybersecurity is a growing concern for local governments. A robust panel featuring voices from Wisconsin Emergency Management, the Wisconsin Department of Justice, local information technology professionals, and university researchers will provide guidance on securing local systems and infrastructure.

In the afternoon, the focus shifts to civic engagement and digital communication. Social media can build trust, spark participation, and strengthen community ties when used wisely. Join experts, including representatives from the city of Appleton, for a deep dive into effective strategies.

The summit will close with a joint executive panel featuring me, Mike Koles of the Wisconsin Towns Association, and Jerry Deschane of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities. Together, we will explore how local governments can break down silos, rethink legacy systems, and lead collaboratively across boundaries.

We encourage you to join us on June 19 in Appleton. You'll find a space to learn, share best practices, and collaborate on solutions that will shape the future of our communities. As we know, by working together, we can accomplish so much more.

**Stay connected.** Visit <u>wicounties.org</u> to access resources and learn about events. For more information about the Local Government Summit on June 19, visit <u>localgovinstitute.org/events</u>.



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### Counties

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## "A day at a Wisconsin fair is like a family reunion,

where old friends reconnect and new friendships begin. Together, we enjoy the creative exhibits, fun contests, engaging entertainment and delicious food. It's a day filled with laughter and a sense of community, highlighting what makes today's fair so special."

> — **Mary Check**, President of the Wisconsin Association of Fairs and Rock County 4-H Fair Manager

TITITI



## From Barns to Big Stages THE POWER OF WISCONSIN COUNTY FAIRS

By Jayme Buttke, Executive Director, Wisconsin Association of Fairs

isconsin's fair tradition dates back to 1842, when neighbors gathered in Waukesha County to showcase their livestock and agricultural goods. Those early exhibitors at the state's first county fair won a total of \$40 in prizes — a modest beginning for what would become a cornerstone of Wisconsin's rural identity.

Nearly two centuries later, fairs continue to be a vibrant celebration of agriculture, innovation and community spirit. Today, over 3 million people attend Wisconsin's 74 county and district fairs each year. As fewer residents maintain direct ties to farming, these events have become essential connectors, keeping communities close to their agricultural roots.

The first objective of every fair is to present a teaching and learning experience that's engaging and enjoyable for all generations. Serving as a gathering place for the community, fairs offer informational exhibits, hands-on learning experiences, nationally recognized entertainment, local performances, and the opportunity for youth and adults to work side by side. Fairs showcase food production, sustainable practices, and modern farming technology while also providing an affordable, family-friendly venue. Throughout the years, fairs have evolved to reflect changes in agriculture and technology while taking on a leadership role in helping innovations align with the needs of their communities.

Recognizing the value of fairs, the state began providing financial support just 14 years after that first gathering in Waukesha. In 1856, the state adopted legislation to distribute aid for fair premiums, the monetary awards given to exhibitors. This support continues today, with a current annual allocation of \$650,000 — an amount that recently returned to funding levels last seen in 1999. While no fair receives full reimbursement, the state's contribution remains a crucial part of the equation.

In 2024 alone, more than 47,000 exhibitors presented over 314,000 entries at county and district fairs. These participants earned an average of \$15.52 each, with more

Continued on page 8

#### **OZAUKEE COUNTY FAIR**

A cherished tradition in historic Cedarburg, the Ozaukee County Fair is one of the few remaining without a daily gate admission. The hardworking team of volunteers is committed to connecting families to the roots of agriculture, fostering an appreciation for where their food and fiber come from.

#### WAUKESHA COUNTY FAIR

With a strong belief in tradition and making memories for fairgoers of all ages, the Waukesha County Fair appeals to a broad audience with a diverse lineup of main stage national entertainment, new and exciting foods that tempt the tastebuds, and rides and special events that give thrill seekers a rush. The first county fair to offer an aerial plane stunt show and a drone light show, the Waukesha County Fair is bringing entertainment to the sky.



to courtesy of the Kewaunee County Fair

#### Continued from page 7

than 70% of premiums awarded to junior exhibitors. Altogether, fairs distributed over \$733,000 in premiums, with community and

sponsor support bridging the funding gap.

The nonprofit Wisconsin Association of Fairs represents 75 local, regional, and state fairs, 150 associate members, and other dedicated fair advocates. It collaborates closely with the UW-Madison Division of Extension and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection to support fairs and strengthen the industry.

While agriculture remains at their core, county fairs continually adapt to shifting trends and fairgoer expectations. Community engagement is key to their future.

Support from state and local governments, businesses, civic organizations, and volunteers are essential to maintaining strong fairs, raising adequate funds, and



#### ATTEND A LOCAL County fair this summer!

For the complete schedule of Wisconsin county and district fairs, visit <u>wifairs.com</u>. addressing volunteer retention and recruitment challenges. Preserving fairgrounds, whether publicly funded or independently operated,

will require substantial investment, especially as aging infrastructure demands attention.

Thank you to Wisconsin's county officials and community leaders for your continued support in ensuring this beloved tradition thrives for generations to come. Your advocacy for fairground funding, attendance at local fairs, and encouragement of fair board development all play a crucial role in keeping your county vibrant, connected, and forward-thinking.

Let's continue to build the future leaders of tomorrow — one fair, one board, and one county at a time.

Jayme Buttke has been the executive director of the nonprofit Wisconsin Association of Fairs since 2005. The WAF represents 75 fairs, 150 associate members and a handful of fair enthusiasts.

#### MANITOWOC COUNTY FAIR

With a daily admission, take part in unlimited carnival rides, music entertainment, grandstand shows, comedy acts, sea lion shows, pony rides and more at the Manitowoc County Fair!

#### SHEBOYGAN COUNTY FAIR

Home of Plymouth Dirt Track Racing, the Sheboygan County Fair draws in people from all over the state and country. The well-groomed fairgrounds feature beautiful landscaping as well as the Education and Household Building, which has been proudly standing for more than a century and houses large educational and open-class exhibits.

#### **JEFFERSON COUNTY FAIR**

It's a one-of-a-kind celebration that blends tradition, community, and heart. The small, meaningful moments make the Jefferson County Fair truly special, like the quiet focus during a live shooting sport judging exhibition, the joyful energy of a rabbit hopping demonstration, or the pride on stage as local acts perform for their neighbors.

#### **ROCK COUNTY 4-H FAIR**

With an unwavering commitment to youth development and agriculture, the Rock County 4-H Fair provides a platform for 4-H and FFA members to showcase their hard work through livestock exhibitions, horticulture displays, and creative arts and crafts. Their dedication and passion make the fair a vibrant showcase of budding talent and innovation.

#### **VERNON COUNTY FAIR**

A quintessential country fair with a rich history of being family-oriented, the Vernon County Fair is committed to offering family entertainment, including the Little Britches Dairy show and the Sunflower project geared toward younger children. Come experience all the Vernon County Fair has to offer as the last county fair of the year!



### How are county fairs structured?

By UW-Madison Division of Extension and the Wisconsin Association of Fairs

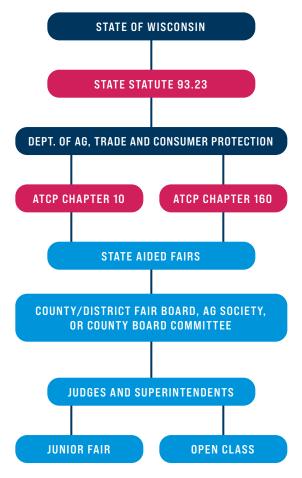
n Wisconsin, 74 county and district fairs receive state aid. However, the name "county fair" can be misleading. While a county's name may be included in the fair title, it does not automatically mean the county has resources invested in the planning and delivery of the fair. Currently, 32 county fairs are operated by an agricultural society or another nonprofit organization, independent of county government.

The remaining 42 fairs have some level of county support, which may include use of county-owned facilities and grounds, oversight by a county board committee, and/or county funding.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection provides governance over county fairs for the purpose of receiving state aid, as outlined in Chapter 160 of the agency's administrative rules. Generally speaking, there is one fair in each county that receives state aid and, as such, is designated as the "county fair."

DATCP's marketing division includes a fair coordinator who plays a key role in maintaining smooth communication between state officials and local fair planners, ensuring that fairs operate in compliance with state statutes. The coordinator oversees the state aid reimbursement process, visits fairs, conducts training workshops, and maintains the official list of judges.

The fairs also receive support from the Wisconsin Association of Fairs and the UW-Madison Division of Extension, which is described elsewhere in this feature series. □



Adapted from a Wisconsin Association of Fairs organizational chart.

**WISCONSIN STATE AIDED FAIRS STRUCTURE** 

#### **IOWA COUNTY FAIR**

Travel to the heart of the Driftless Region to enjoy big-fair fun with small-town charm. The lowa County Fair offers opportunities for all ages, including daily free grandstand entertainment, music, food vendors galore, and a full carnival.

#### LANGLADE COUNTY FAIR

A stand-alone, nonprofit organization run 100% by volunteers, the Langlade County Fair is free at the gate. Funds raised during the fair are donated to youth and senior organizations.

#### **OCONTO COUNTY YOUTH FAIR**

Free to the public, the Oconto County Youth Fair features a midway carnival, music, face painting, balloon sculpture, magic show, mechanical bull riding, and tractor, truck, horse, and mini/mod pulls. A "sale of champions" live auction is held on the last day.



#### By the Wisconsin Association of Fairs

he 74 county and district fairs across the state are more than just entertainment; they serve as economic drivers, leadership incubators and community cornerstones. The Wisconsin Association of Fairs' recent "You Make THE Difference" leadership tour embodied this mission and reinforced the vital role fairs play in Wisconsin counties.

In April, more than 200 fair board members representing 61 fairs gathered in five regions across Wisconsin for an inspiring leadership experience. These sessions were led by Ian Hill, an award-winning humanitarian and globally recognized community development expert.

The WAF Board first encountered Hill's work at the International Association of Fairs & Expositions Conference in 2024. With over 25 years of experience empowering leaders across North America and beyond, Hill's message resonated deeply: Without evolution, the fair industry risks losing relevance in a rapidly shifting society. County fairs — and the county governments that support them — must embrace innovation, leadership and community building.

His vision was so impactful that he was invited to be the keynote speaker at WAF's state convention in January and to lead the spring 2025 district training tour. This decision sparked a transformative initiative for our state's fairs.

Wisconsin was honored to be the first recipient of a Fairs.com grant to bring the "You Make THE Difference" program statewide. This fully funded national initiative aims to strengthen community events like county fairs by equipping fair boards and volunteers with tools for leadership, outreach and organizational development. These are precisely the skills that county officials value in their local partners.

This program addressed the real challenges faced by

local fairs, including volunteer retention and recruitment, advocacy, fundraising, and effective communication. Participants explored critical leadership themes to better understand their roles as event organizers and stewards of tradition, community assets and economic catalysts.





"The WAF Board works diligently to inform and assist fairs," said Mary Check, WAF president and manager of the Rock County 4-H Fair. "We will continue to serve as a support system for anything they may require. Our collective efforts are tailored toward 'Making a Difference' and meeting our mission."

County officials should take note. This investment in fair leadership is an investment in stronger, more resilient communities. The ripple effect is already visible. Attendees left feeling energized and inspired, many with concrete plans to improve their boards, deepen community partnerships, and reimagine their fair's role in local development. This kind of momentum will benefit counties culturally and economically.

Our fairs serve as platforms for youth development, agriculture education, small business exposure, and civic pride — all of which

contribute directly to the vitality of our counties. The "You Make THE Difference" tour reaffirmed that when fair leaders grow, so do the communities they serve. □



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### The Fairest of the Fairs Celebrating All Things Fair

By the Wisconsin Association of Fairs

eyond sparkly tiaras and sashes, the Wisconsin Fairest of the Fairs Program has celebrated one of the most impactful industries in our state for nearly 60 years. Since 1967, the program has highlighted the importance of Wisconsin fairs, their educational opportunities, community involvement, and the dedication and energy required to

organize a fair at the local, district, and state levels.

As an ambassador for all things fair, becoming the "Wisconsin Fairest of the Fairs" is not easy. The rigorous selection process takes place To request a visit by the Wisconsin Fairest of the Fairs at your local event, submit a request at <u>wifairs.com</u>. Follow Wisconsin Fairest of the Fairs on social media for fair highlights and upcoming appearances.

during the annual convention of the Wisconsin Association of Fairs. Local-level "Fairests" participate in individual and group interviews, on-stage events with impromptu questions,



radio commercials, social events, etiquette lessons and workshops.

Only one of the 30 to 40 contestants competing each year can claim the title. However, all contestants leave the four-day contest with enhanced communication skills, more professionalism, and a commitment to advocate for their local

> fair and community. The Wisconsin Fairest of the Fairs contest and program are supported by generous donors, including the Wisconsin Counties Association. We appreciate their ongoing support as we prepare young leaders to champion the fair

industry in their local communities.

Once selected, the Wisconsin Fairest of the Fairs serves a one-year term traveling across the state, attending as many of the county, district, and state fairs as possible. The Fairest learns what makes each fair special, regardless of its size, attendance, or budget, and helps to share its story. Each year is an adventure as the Fairest is responsible for scheduling their busy summer and maintaining a strong presence on social media.

The Fairest of the Fairs is the ambassador of the Wisconsin State Fair, also known as the "Best II Days of Summer." You can find the Fairest introducing entertainment, distributing ribbons in the show ring, interacting with fairgoers, vendors, and exhibitors, and promoting all the delicious fair food in West Allis.

"Serving as the Wisconsin Fairest of the Fairs was a oncein-a-lifetime experience that I will never forget," said Kelsey Henderson of Racine County, the 2024 Wisconsin Fairest of the Fairs. "It inspired me and further fueled my passion, unlocking a whole new level of love for the fair industry."

Current Wisconsin Fairest of the Fairs Megan Salentine from Kewaunee County was crowned in January. "I am honored to be serving as the 59th Wisconsin Fairest of the Fair. I am looking forward to the fair season, ready to engage with fairgoers and experience the joy and community of Wisconsin's diverse fair industry. Please say hello if you see me at a fair!" □



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## **Community, Growth and Tradition**



### GRANT COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS

By Amy Olson, Fairgrounds and Operations Director, Grant County

he Grant County Fair is a county-owned entity with a unique structure. Its 40-acre fairgrounds are situated on city property, meaning that operations must adhere to city regulations while the fair continues to be an integral part of the county.

In addition to hosting the annual fair each August, the fairgrounds serve as a vital community hub for events, educational programs and agricultural showcases. Throughout the year, the fairgrounds host a wide range of activities, including livestock exhibitions, community celebrations, fundraisers, business meetings, and youth development programs. The overarching goal is to provide a welcoming space that strengthens the county's sense of community and supports long-term growth.

The fair is governed by a six-member board composed of county board supervisors and a county administrator. A full-time county employee acts as department head and oversees the fairgrounds' year-round operations, working closely with two full-time maintenance staff to keep the facilities in excellent condition. Preparation for the annual fair includes managing sponsorships, marketing, vendor coordination, entertainment booking, judge selection, and exhibitor management, along with various administrative duties to ensure smooth operations.

The Grant County Fair maintains a strong collaborative

relationship with the county government. The fair board oversees and ensures alignment with county priorities, with several county departments contributing to the fair's success. The county IT department manages internet and technology needs, and the county health department,



Amy Olson

sheriff's office, and emergency management provide essential support at no cost during the fair, along with the city police department. Many county employees also volunteer their time to support the event.

Budgeting and financial compliance are managed in collaboration with the Grant County Finance Department. The fair's budget is incorporated into the county's overall budget, meaning that surplus funds at the end of the year are returned to the county's general fund, while any shortfalls are covered by the county. A capital improvement plan outlines long-term goals for the fairgrounds, with funding requests presented to the full county board during the annual budget process.

In addition to strong county partnerships, the fair maintains active involvement in the Wisconsin Association of Fairs and the International Association of Fairs &

#### **BLAKE'S PRAIRIE JUNIOR FAIR**

Located in the small town of Bloomington in Grant County, the Blake's Prairie Junior Fair enjoys strong community support. A one-time button fee allows for weekend access to the grounds and the grandstand.

#### **BAYFIELD COUNTY FAIR**

With admission, enjoy unlimited carnival rides and grandstand events, including bull riding, barrel racing, and local talent through live music and exhibits. The Bayfield County Fair features an unparalleled blend of affordable family fun, diverse entertainment, and famous 4-H milkshakes.

Expositions. Membership in these leading industry organizations provides access to valuable resources, networking opportunities, and insights into state regulations and national trends. Participation in WAF helps maintain connections with other Wisconsin fairs and the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection while involvement with IAFE brings new ideas and best practices from across the country.

Looking ahead, the Grant County Fair remains dedicated to enhancing the fairgrounds while ensuring financial sustainability. Ongoing efforts concentrate on evaluating and improving the fair experience by introducing new attractions and preserving cherished traditions, such as livestock exhibitions and grandstand shows. Modernizing the facilities is a key priority, with enhancements aimed at increasing accessibility, safety, and the overall visitor experience. A strategic approach to revenue generation supports the fair's fiscal viability. Strong sponsorships and community partnerships provide critical funding and in-kind support, enabling improvements while keeping the fair affordable. Careful budgeting and expense management maximize resources and maintain financial health. Additionally, the fairgrounds function as a year-round venue, generating extra revenue through community gatherings, facility rentals, off-season events, and storage.

The fair's leadership emphasizes teamwork and mutual respect to address the evolving needs of the fairgrounds while creating opportunities for growth. Their goal is to honor the traditions of the Grant County Fair while continuously enhancing the experience for exhibitors, visitors, and the broader community.

The Grant County Fair will be held in Lancaster, Aug. 13-17.

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Photos courtesy of the Central Wisconsin State Fair

## **Cultivating Tomorrow's Leaders Today**



### CENTRAL WISCONSIN STATE FAIR

By Dale Christiansen, Executive Director, Central Wisconsin State Fair

s summer begins to wind down each August, Marshfield comes alive with the excitement of the Central Wisconsin State Fair. Over six days, we welcome more than 20,000 visitors daily, making the fair the largest community event in Wood

County. It's a unique opportunity to showcase what makes our corner of the world truly special.

A highlight of the fairgrounds — and a source of great local pride — is the world's largest round barn. Built in 1916, this iconic structure stands as a symbol of Marshfield and the fair itself. More than just a building, the round barn represents the region's deep agricultural roots and the rich history of Wood County's dairy industry.

From cranberries and cheese curds to forest products and work boots, the Central Wisconsin State Fair offers more than just an annual event. It provides year-round



facilities, educational programming, and entertainment that enrich the central Wisconsin community.

The organization behind the fair represents a true collaboration. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the fair is managed by an executive director and guided by a

12-member board. Nine of these members are community volunteers elected to three-year terms, renewable for up to three terms, with a one-year break required before serving again. Each year, three of these seats are up for election, which helps maintain consistency and momentum. The remaining three seats are appointed: one from the Wood County Board, one from the Marshfield City Council, and a junior fair representative, each serving a renewable one-year term.

Fairground Park, where the event takes place, is jointly owned: 75% by the city of Marshfield and 25% by the fair.

#### LAFAYETTE COUNTY FAIR

**Celebrate the county's rich agricultural roots** at the Lafayette County Fair. Grandstand highlights include the "best dirt track racing in the area" and the Badger State Tractor Pull, which has been voted a spectator and puller favorite.

#### **DODGE COUNTY FAIR**

**Featuring youth-oriented programs,** with everything from livestock to foods, crafts and crops, the Dodge County Fair is 138 years old, and stockholder-owned and operated. Big-name entertainment, tractor pulls, and a demo derby are included in the cost of entry.

The fair is responsible for managing and maintaining the grounds while the city provides a yearly budget to cover operational costs for 11 months. The fair covers expenses during fair month and manages all non-fair event bookings.

The Wood County Board plays a vital role in supporting the Junior Fair, which is held during the first three days of the fair. This portion features more than 1,000 youth exhibitors who submit more than 3,500 entries. The county's financial support helps offset youth development costs and ensures that these valuable programs continue to thrive. The week concludes with an open show division, bringing the overall participation to more than 1,500 exhibitors and nearly 7,000 exhibits.

The fair commission, consisting of three Wood County Board members and three Marshfield City Council members, guides the future of the fairgrounds. This group is responsible for approving renovations and new construction on the grounds.

For 122 years, the Central Wisconsin State Fair has been a cherished tradition where fairgoers and exhibitors can make lasting memories and meaningful connections.

We are deeply thankful to our sponsors, whose generous support brings the fair to life and strengthens our community. Looking ahead, we are addressing building needs and launching a new project to support year-round events, ensuring the fairgrounds continue to serve our community well beyond fair week.

Through our educational initiatives and focus on community involvement, we are cultivating tomorrow's leaders today.

Held in Marshfield, the 2025 Central Wisconsin State Fair is scheduled for Aug. 19-24.

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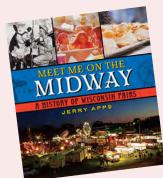
## True to Our Roots

*By Matt Immel, Treasurer, Fond du Lac County Agricultural Society* 

stablished in 1852, the Fond du Lac County Fair is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation operated by the Fond du Lac County Agricultural Society. An 11-member volunteer board of directors governs the Ag Society and employs approximately 30 part-time and seasonal workers who live in the county.

The Ag Society leases the fairgrounds from the county each July for the annual Fond du Lac County Fair. We are fortunate to have a county executive, county board and grounds superintendent who are committed to investing in and caring for the fairgrounds. It truly is one of the best in the state!

The county recently partnered with the city and the National Exchange Bank Foundation to build a beautiful new stage on the grounds. In addition to benefiting the annual fair, the stage will allow other nonprofits and organizations to hold fundraisers and community events



#### Meet Me on the Midway A HISTORY OF WISCONSIN FAIRS

Published by the Wisconsin Historical Society Press, "Meet Me on the Midway" is a tribute to one of Wisconsin's great summer traditions.

It includes a general history of fairs in the state as well as brief summaries of individual county fair histories. Jerry Apps takes readers on a trip to the fair, from its earliest incarnations as livestock exhibitors to today's multitudes of exhibits and demonstrations, grandstand entertainment, games and rides, and competitions of all sorts.  $\Box$  throughout the year, weather permitting. This structure is the result of innovative collaboration and funding from both the private and public sectors, paving the way for future renovations and expansions of the facility.

The Ag Society's annual budget, funded solely by sponsorships, donations, ticket sales, and vendor space rentals, ranges from \$800,000 to \$1,000,000. Profits generated by the fair, if any, are used by the Ag Society to build reserves, remain self-sufficient and assist with capital improvements to the fairgrounds. Over the years, the society has contributed to various projects, including \$150,000 for the expansion and renovation of the recreation center on the grounds, which houses the fair office.

The Ag Society's philosophy centers on providing education, entertainment and affordable family fun for the residents of the communities we serve and beyond. With that objective in mind, the mission of the annual fair is to allow youth to showcase their projects. We also offer residents of all ages the opportunity to compete in an open class show. True to our roots, the annual fair seeks to maintain the spirit of friendly competition while highlighting the craftsmanship, agriculture and innovation of the people of Fond du Lac County.

Admission at the Fond du Lac County Fair is only charged for grandstand entertainment events, which feature national recording artists and attract patrons from across the state and nation. In addition to benefiting the fair, these visitors support numerous local businesses. The revenue generated allows us to offer free, family-friendly entertainment in a safe environment where families can create memories and traditions to be cherished for decades!

The 2025 Fond du Lac County Fair in Fond du Lac is scheduled for July 16-20.

#### **DUNN COUNTY FAIR**

An entertaining and educational event for people of all ages, the Dunn County Fair is noted for the Red Cedar Speedway races and the National Tractor Pullers Association Region 3 Truck and Tractor Pull.

#### **KENOSHA COUNTY FAIR**

#### The birthplace of the Interstate Racing

Association 410 Sprint Cars and Combine Demolition Derby, the Kenosha County Fair also features one of the largest open-class exhibitor buildings. Don't miss the large auctions for pies and small and large animals.

#### **JACKSON COUNTY FAIR**

**One of the most anticipated events** of the year is the Jackson County Fair's Combine Derby, with 10-16 combines crashing it out to see who becomes the victor.



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## NORTHERN WISCONSIN STATE FAIR

By Rusty Volk, Executive Director, Northern Wisconsin State Fair Association, Inc.

n the 1800s, travel to southern Wisconsin wasn't easy for residents of the northern counties. So, residents in the Chippewa Falls area drafted a charter to create the Northern Wisconsin State Fair, which was adopted by the state Legislature in 1897. Soon, 28 counties were associated with the fair. This regional event quickly became a cornerstone of community life, blending agriculture, entertainment, and economic opportunity.

During the Great Depression, however, financial hardship took a toll. Attendance dropped, and the fair's future became uncertain. In 1932, a group of local businessmen intervened to preserve the tradition by purchasing the fairgrounds to ensure its survival. Today, the Northern Wisconsin State Fair Association, Inc. remains a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) public charity. All funds are reinvested directly into the venue to support its mission: "to provide up-to-date grounds and facilities that promote events and attractions, enhancing the economic viability of our community." Since that pivotal year, the fairgrounds have remained privately owned and operated. Over the decades, they have faced numerous challenges, from unpredictable weather to shifting economies.

In 2007, another critical juncture arrived. Two controlling stockholders retired and put the property up for sale. Facing the possibility of losing the fairgrounds entirely, the community rallied. A successful capital campaign saved the venue from demolition, and nine community leaders were chosen to manage and revitalize the property. In 2008, a full-time executive director was hired to oversee operations and guide future growth.

Since then, the fairgrounds have undergone significant planning and assessment efforts. Structural evaluations, utility upgrades, and long-term planning sessions have all contributed to a 25-year roadmap dubbed the "Fairgrounds of the Future." Community input has been central in shaping the vision, ensuring that development reflects local needs and aspirations.

#### **POLK COUNTY FAIR**

Picture yourself at the Polk County Fair. The 4-day event offers great food, amazing exhibits, a carnival, animals of all sizes, free music and entertainment, and exciting grandstand events.

#### WASHBURN COUNTY FAIR

A little county fair with a mighty heart. The animals (even a Texas Longhorn) are a must-see at the Washburn County Fair, as is the one-room schoolhouse filled with hand-crafted entries and the Exhibition Hall that will tickle your senses with photography, arts and crafts, flowers and veggies, baked goods, and food preservation.

Agriculture remains a vital part of the fair's identity. In 2019, the collapse of the historic Red Barn Coliseum sparked the launch of the Barn Replacement Project. The next two years were dedicated to planning and fundraising. Following the 2022 fair, outdated barns were removed and replaced with modern, functional structures, including a state-of-the-art coliseum. Thanks to generous support, including barn naming rights for local businesses, the Chippewa Falls community raised \$6.5 million to construct a new agricultural campus, solidifying this key component of the "Fairgrounds of the Future."

Today, the Northern Wisconsin State Fair is one of the largest in the state. Its board of directors reflects a diverse cross-section of the community, including leaders from agriculture, business, and government. As a nonprofit organization, the fairgrounds serve as more than just a venue for an annual event; they function as a year-round hub for festivals, events, and community services.

One of the latest additions, a newly completed agricultural campus featuring a community safe room and tornado shelter, underscores the fair's ongoing commitment to addressing the broader needs of the region. The fairgrounds continue to collaborate with city and county departments, providing space for training, education, and public services.

At its core, the Northern Wisconsin State Fair focuses on connection, uniting people to celebrate tradition, innovation and the enduring spirit of community. • *The 2025 Northern Wisconsin State Fair is scheduled for July 9-13 in Chippewa Falls.* 

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Photo credit: Joy Brattlie, Jefferson County 4-H Volunteer

## **Sustaining a Tradition** THE PARTNERSHIP OF COUNTY FAIRS AND EXTENSION

By Jason Hausler, Assistant Dean, UW-Madison Division of Extension

rowing up in central Wisconsin, my family and 1 attended the Wisconsin Valley Fair in Wausau, where I took full advantage of the events and opportunities. I have fond memories of going to concerts, exploring the youth exhibits, and enjoying carnival rides with friends. Each year, there was something new and exciting.

When I began working for UW-Madison Division of Extension as a 4-H educator in Dunn County, I experienced county fairs in a new way. Collaborating with volunteers and youth to showcase what they had learned throughout the year provided me with a whole new perspective on exhibits and the role of county fairs in our communities.

In my current role with Extension, I work closely with fairs throughout the state and see firsthand the various ways they create meaning and memories. While today's county fairs look different from those of my childhood, offering many more opportunities for community engagement and entertainment, they remain educational and memorable experiences.

#### The importance of county fairs for 4-H youth

Extension educators from numerous program areas engage with county fairs, but Wisconsin 4-H, one of Extension's signature membership programs, remains the most widely recognized connection.

From exhibiting livestock and displaying photography to demonstrating engineering skills through rocket launches, 4-H youth are enthusiastic about presenting their longterm projects at county fairs. In a 2024 survey of participating youth, nearly 75% of those who



Jason Hausler

responded felt strongly that the 4-H program gives them the opportunity to explore what they truly care about.

In addition to providing an opportunity for youth to showcase their individual growth and development, county fairs are a powerful, real-world application of the 4-H Thriving Model and its four components:

**SPARKS:** By giving 4-H members the venue to display their skills and talents through various projects, the fair provides a platform for youth to pursue what they love and gain recognition, helping to spark their passions.

**BELONGING:** 4-H members become part of the fair community alongside friends, leaders, and mentors who share similar goals and interests, which makes them feel valued and accepted regardless of their experience. They

#### **SAUK COUNTY FAIR**

Free admission at the Sauk County Fair offers a valuable opportunity for the community to engage in a wide range of learning experiences, entertainment, food, rides, informational displays, and insight into where their food originates, while also allowing families and friends to spend quality time together.

#### **GREEN COUNTY FAIR**

Come for the fun, stay for the tradition at the Green County Fair. With paid gate admission, enjoy free entertainment, including exciting events at the grandstand, lively performances in the entertainment tent, and a showcase of youth projects across a wide range of categories.

collaborate, support one another, and celebrate each other's achievements. This sense of camaraderie helps them feel like they belong to the 4-H "family" and contributes to building a strong, positive self-identity.

**RELATIONSHIPS:** Whether collaborating on a project, setting up displays, or competing in contests, county fairs serve as a wonderful venue for 4-H members to forge and nurture connections with other youth, adults, and community members. These friendships often endure beyond the event, providing growth and support in the future.

**ENGAGEMENT:** Throughout the process of preparing and showcasing their projects, 4-H members must be proactive and put forth their best effort. The fair provides them with an opportunity to apply their knowledge, solve problems, and think critically, which facilitates further learning and growth.

#### A historic partnership

Extension's interface with county fairs around the state extends beyond 4-H. Educators and staff from across

Continued on page 24



#### County Fairs in the 4th Wave By Steven Deller, Dept. of Agricultural and Applied Economics, UW-Madison

uccessful county fairs, which include youth-centered activities, can create meaningful spillovers into the larger community. They reinforce social capital at the community level, but more importantly, promote the confidence and ability of the community to tackle other issues. The network of leaders, volunteers, and active participants involved in the county fair can be leveraged to make further investments in the community.

Beyond these inherent benefits to the larger community, investing time and resources in a county fair enhances the livability of many communities. Increasingly, communities across Wisconsin are seeking to implement community economic development strategies that embody notions of

placemaking, or the "4th wave" of economic development.

Rather than asking why a business would locate, start, or expand in our community, we should consider: Why would people choose to live here? What makes our community attractive or livable? Communities are discovering that investing in farmers' markets, art fairs, concerts in the park, and public libraries enhance a community's appeal.

In the 4th wave, the county fair becomes a piece of a larger puzzle, providing an opportunity to unite and showcase various elements of the community that make it an attractive place to live, work, and perhaps start a business. A decadesold tradition can serve as an integral part of a contemporary approach to community economic development.

#### **PIERCE COUNTY FAIR**

Renowned for its animal exhibitions, with over 1,200 entries from 10 species, the Pierce County Fair boasts more than 9,000 entries overall in its open and junior fairs. Food stands feature mouthwatering pies, Ellsworth cheese curds, and tempting BBQ, while the tractor pull and demo derby are audience favorites, along with great music options under the stars.

#### WALWORTH COUNTY FAIR

Immersive, interactive experiences bring agriculture to life at the Walworth County Fair. The award-winning Barnyard Adventure engages attendees of all ages in learning how food gets from the farm to the table, local farmers give kids rides in real combines, and the Discovery Barn is filled with farm animals.

#### Continued from page 23

the spectrum of Extension programming, including agriculture, community development, health and wellbeing, human development and relationships, natural resources, and positive youth development, have engaged with fair partners to move communities forward.

They have collaborated with fairs to provide communitybased education and parenting resources, assist fair boards with strategic planning, organize family-friendly events, create educational displays related to best land management practices and agricultural production, and much more.

Extension's historic partnership with county fairs continues to evolve as our resources and communities change. Over the last six years, Extension has worked with county fairs and the Wisconsin Association of Fairs to better align and delineate our roles and responsibilities. Strengthening this partnership has made the fairs more sustainable.

County fairs have been a cornerstone of Wisconsin for more than a century, adjusting and growing to reflect the unique personality and available resources of our communities. The county fair's ability to adapt and transform has created a community treasure of which Wisconsinites can be proud. We are excited about what the future holds.

Jason Hausler is an assistant dean with the UW-Madison Division of Extension and serves as the liaison to the Wisconsin Association of Fairs. Prior to his current role, Hausler served as the Area Extension director for Clark, Marathon, Portage and Wood counties. He joined Extension in 2010 as a county-based 4-H youth development educator in Dunn County.



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By William L. Oemichen, J.D., Professor of Practice-Law and Local Government Law Educator, UW-Madison Division of Extension

isconsin counties, along with other local units of government, are beginning to embrace the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance employee capabilities and increase service levels for citizens.

As a professor of practice in law and an educator with the Local Government Education Program at the UW-Madison Division of Extension, I field questions daily about AI use from local governments across the state.

I have used AI for more than two decades, both as a national security researcher at UW-Madison and as a Farm Credit association board director overseeing billions of dollars of loans made by the association to farmers, ranchers, and other ag producers. The association uses AI to help analyze credit applications. As an

Extension educator, I provide in-person Al training and information, and review and make recommendations on draft employee Al-use policies.

This article is the first in a three-part series in Wisconsin Counties magazine about Al. We'll begin with an overview of Al.

#### What is artificial intelligence?

Artificial intelligence, known as Al for short, refers to computer systems that can perform tasks typically requiring human intelligence. Al offers a spectrum of capabilities from the simple to the complex. "Traditional Al" includes rule-based systems (e.g., the operation of traffic lights) and pattern recognition systems (e.g., spam filters on your email).

To the surprise of many sometimes-skeptical county government officials, these types of AI functions have been around for several decades and are firmly embedded in our lives. Online shopping recommendations,

In a recent study, the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis found that 40% of Americans aged 18 to 64 are using generative AI.



fitness trackers, social media feeds, music streaming, navigation aids, ride-sharing apps, and image recognition are all examples. You likely have received anti-fraud notices from your bank or credit union asking you to verify

whether you used your credit card at a merchant — that's Al.

Al language and image recognition capabilities are advancing rapidly. In the 2013 movie "Her," actor Joaquin Phoenix's character develops a relationship with an Al-intelligent

operating system with a female voice. The system calls itself Samantha, and actor Scarlett Johansson provides the voice. At the time, I thought this was both cool and somewhat unbelievable, but here we are in 2025, and this, along with so much more, is available. According to AI experts like Ethan Mollick at the Wharton School of Business, AI development will continue to advance at an even faster pace.

#### What is generative AI?

Today, we also have "generative AI." The most wellknown example is ChatGPT, an advanced language processing program that became publicly available in November 2022.

Generative Al creates new content, such as text, images, audio, video, or code, based on patterns it has learned from existing data. Generative Al is built on training and machine-learning algorithms that analyze vast amounts of data to identify patterns, enabling the creation of new content that resembles the data it was "trained" on, such as the Internet, books and other electronic publications.

ChatGPT is used weekly by 400 million people, of whom 67.7 million are located in the United States. Other examples of generative Al include Google's Gemini, which is designed to be a personalized assistant that can process text, code, audio, images, and voice; Quora's Poe, which allows users to get instant answers to questions and engage in back-and-forth conversations with several Al-powered bots; Anthropic's Claude, which touts itself as the "next generation Al assistant;" DeepAl, which converts text descriptions into high-quality images; and Microsoft's Copilot, which focuses on productivity and work-related tasks.

In a recent study, the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis found that 40% of Americans aged 18 to 64 are using generative AI. A separate 2024 Salesforce survey further discovered that 64% of generative AI users are either Generation Z or millennials. This latter statistic indicates that AI use will continue to grow, with younger generations expecting some government services to be delivered through AI, such as chatbots that mimic text conversations with government employees.

In next month's issue, we'll explore how counties and other local units of government are deploying the technology, and in the August issue, we'll examine potential Al use risks, risk mitigation strategies, and how Wisconsin counties might develop Al training and use policies.

William L. Oemichen, J.D., is a professor of practice in law and an educator with the Local Government Education program at the UW-Madison Division of Extension.

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## Wood County's Partnership Prioritizes Public Health

By Abigail Becker, Senior Associate for Communications & Outreach, UW-Madison UniverCity Alliance

ublic health is everywhere. "That's what makes public health interesting, challenging,

and full of opportunities for local public health staff and students who are interested in entering the field," said Kristie Egge, the supervisor of strategic initiatives for the Wood County Health Department. "Education, financial wellness and food security are all related to public health."

The wide range of intersecting topics motivated Egge to partner with UniverCity Alliance to improve health outcomes in rural communities through creative strategies. UniverCity is a UW-Madison program that connects local governments to university resources.

"It was exciting to be connected to all the resources that we otherwise don't have access to," Egge said, "including the university staff and the really bright students who are in unique program areas that overlap with public health."

The county has a history of collaborating with community partners to develop evidence-based health initiatives that address its most pressing needs. The 2022-2025 partnership with UniverCity built upon this



work. The completed projects cover a range of topics, including child care, outdoor recreation, health equity,

affordable housing, and reintegration into the community after experiences in the justice system. Several projects are yielding tangible impacts.

A report documenting potential solutions to child care challenges in Wood County aided local leaders in securing substantial funding for the community through local sources and the federal American Rescue Plan Act. "The students helped to frame out child care issues. We were able to utilize their research and knowledge, put that into proposals, and then go back to our county board to request funding," Egge said. "It isn't often the county has dollars to be able to give back to the community like that."

The students also reviewed the county's employee policy handbook and provided suggestions for more inclusive policies and language to support the county's recruitment

INTERESTED IN PARTNERING WITH UNIVERCITY ALLIANCE? Email <u>UniverCityAlliance@wisc.edu</u>. and retention efforts. Additionally, they created a hiring bias manual to assist organizations in developing a more equitable hiring process and promoting a diverse workplace for all employees. A report documenting potential solutions to child care challenges in Wood County aided local leaders in securing substantial funding for the community through local sources and the federal American Rescue Plan Act.

"So many organizations have blind spots they don't even know about, and it's exciting to think about how this could benefit more organizations than just ours and have a broader community

impact," community health planner Niki Lucht said.

The program engaged 30 UW-Madison students, including Zoe Walts, a doctoral student in epidemiology focused on the intersection of biological and social determinants and colorectal cancer outcomes. Walts works with Dr. Shaneda Warren Andersen, a UW-Madison associate professor of population health sciences and coleader of the Cancer Prevention and Control Program at the UW Carbone Cancer Center.

Walts evaluated the return on investment of Wood County's PATCH (Providers and Teens Communicating for Health) Program, an innovative, youth-driven initiative aimed at enhancing adolescents' health and well-being nationwide.

\* TO LEARN MORE...

about Wood County's partnership, visit univercity.wisc.edu/woodcounty.

"It was really valuable to me as an epidemiologist in training to have health department staff show me what public health in practice actually looks like," Walts said. "Local public health is a very

different world from academic public health."

Walts continued to work with Wood County on an independent study project, collecting secondary data for the county's community health assessment to fulfill a community-engaged scholarship doctoral minor.

"Being in research, it's easy to forget the impact that your work might actually have," Walts said. "Bringing that back to the public health practice, you can see that some of this work I'm doing might actually improve the community."

Abigail Becker is the senior associate for communications and outreach at the UW-Madison UniverCity Alliance. The mission of UniverCity is to improve the quality and visibility of UW-Madison's education, research and service contribution to the high-road development of local communities that reflects the values of equity, democracy and sustainability.

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## **How to Prepare for Changes in Telephone Services**

By Paul Anker and Dan Aylward, Managing Consultants, Abilita

or decades, copper analog phone lines, or "plain old telephone service," have powered some of the most critical systems in our public infrastructure, including fire panels, security alarms, elevator phones, and faxes. Many still rely on copper analog phone lines.

But as the telecommunications industry pivots to digital and cloud-based technologies, carriers are beginning to decommission these services, sometimes notifying customers with as little as a 90- to 120-day notice. Once carriers roll out replacement technologies, they may discontinue copper-based services altogether, making them unavailable at any price.

In the meantime, as more and more analog lines are retired, consumers are facing steep rate hikes for the existing lines (in some cases, by as much as 46 times the contracted rate) and shrinking technical support with longer wait times for repairs.

The question isn't if these changes will affect you, but when.

#### What should you do?

First, establish a baseline by identifying all copper-based services and applications in use. Review vendor contracts to determine the status of each service, the contract expiration dates, options available when the term ends, and how pricing may change if the contract is not renewed.

Then, explore the alternatives. If you expect costs to increase, consider other solutions but proceed cautiously. While many buildings have Internet connectivity, simply switching analog services to the cloud isn't always feasible or practical. Keep in mind that there may be regulatory requirements to meet. For example, public health departments and court proceedings may still need to use fax machines to comply with state and federal laws. Medical applications must adhere to federal privacy laws, and fire alarms and elevators may fall under codes such as NFPA 72 (the National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code). Even as technology evolves, the functionality to abide by these regulations must be supported.

Contact your service providers for assistance. Many already offer modern solutions or have them in development. Vendors recognize the urgency and may be able to help you transition without substantial infrastructure changes. Some options can integrate with your existing network, others utilize cellular or analog-to-IP conversion technologies.

Stay informed about your options and maintain open lines of communication with your vendors. Don't wait for a crisis; act now to avoid rising costs and dwindling support. The shift away from copper is happening.

If you don't have the in-house expertise or time to manage this transition, consider bringing in outside help. Abilita's team of independent consultants specializes in reducing telecom costs, reviewing technology options, and negotiating vendor contracts. We're here to help you make a smooth, strategic shift away from legacy copper services.

Abilita is an independent and objective telecommunications consulting firm that helps local governments reduce and manage costs by providing an analysis of all of telecom costs and services (local, long distance, cellular, and internet) under the premise that most organizations are spending more than they should. Abilita participates in the WCA Services, Inc. program.

Once carriers roll out replacement technologies, they may discontinue copper-based services altogether, making them unavailable at any price.



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## Data Points: Do You Know What They Mean?

ederal, state and local government officials use data daily to make decisions that impact their communities. The data comes from various sources, but often it is commonly reported figures from federal agencies. For example, the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes monthly job numbers and inflation rates, while the U.S. Census Bureau publishes the poverty rate for the nation, for each state, and for counties and school districts within each state.

Often, these figures are taken at face value. And maybe they should be, as they are often the best available data we have on a particular topic. At the same time, users of this data would be wise to have some knowledge of its strengths and weaknesses. This month's Research Room explores this topic, using the poverty rate as an example.

Both the poverty rate and the income cutoffs that define poverty are used in various ways to inform decisions. Considering their prevalence in public discourse and decisionmaking, one might assume these figures are backed by the most up-to-date, relevant, and accurate information. Yet, a full understanding requires a brief history of how poverty is measured, beginning in 1964 with President Lyndon Johnson's declaration of the "War on Poverty," which necessitated an accurate way to measure poverty.

#### The Official Poverty Measure (OPM)

In the 1960s, the Census Bureau developed income thresholds for each family size and determined that those living below the thresholds were "in poverty." Originally, these thresholds were based on the cost of the least expensive food for specific family sizes. Assuming that food comprised onethird of a family's budget, this cost was then multiplied by three to account for other expenses such as housing and transportation. In subsequent years, the thresholds were adjusted for inflation using the consumer price index (CPI-U). This methodology for determining income thresholds is known as the Official Poverty Measure (OPM).

These thresholds are used by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to develop the federal "poverty level." The share of households living below the federal poverty level is called the "poverty rate." Many publicly supported programs, including Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Affordable Care Act marketplace subsidies, and the K-12 free and reduced-price school lunch program, rely on the federal poverty level for eligibility determinations.

In 1964, the poverty rate under the OPM methodology was 19%, meaning around 36 million people were living below the poverty line.

In the subsequent decade, this rate dropped to 11.1%, with 23 million people living below the poverty line. Since then, federal, state, and local governments have spent up to \$40 trillion trying to eradicate poverty. Yet in 2023, the rate remained at 11.1%.

One might see these figures and ask, "What did we accomplish?" Any program requiring such a significant investment only to maintain the status quo should be questioned. At the same time, one might question the methodology for determining the poverty rate. Is the OPM measuring what we think it is measuring? After all, how could such a vast amount of money be spent with little to no movement in the overall persistence of "poverty"?

Since the poverty level threshold is used ubiquitously in

federal and state programs, one might assume the underlying data is thorough and up to date, and it is the best available metric for measuring poverty. However, the methodology behind this figure has changed little in the past 50 years, even though food now accounts for less than one-sixth of a typical family's budget instead of the one-third when the figure was developed. Today, housing, transportation, energy, and health care take up much larger shares of household budgets than they did in 1969.

These and other limitations of the official measure led to various working groups and recommendations from policymakers for new methods to measure poverty. In 2010, the Census Bureau began publishing the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which aims to be a more comprehensive measure of economic hardship.

#### Supplemental Poverty Measure

The SPM is another way to calculate income thresholds. Unlike the OPM, which continues to be considered the "official" rate, the supplemental measure accounts for benefits, such as SNAP, housing subsidies, and tax credits, as well as cash income. The SPM methodology also subtracts some expenses from income, such as child care and health care costs.

In 2009, the poverty rate calculated using the SPM methodology was 15.9%, compared to an OPM rate of 14.3%. In 11 of the 15 years since the SPM was introduced, it was higher than the official rate. Most notably in 2020 and 2021, however, the supplemental measure was significantly lower because it accounts for refundable tax credits, such as those included in the various legislative responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

With these changes, one might assume this new method to be the most accurate way to measure poverty. But this brings us back to the question about the effectiveness of the "War on Poverty." In most years, the rate calculated via the SPM is higher than that of the OPM, meaning that, according to this new measurement, even more people are living in poverty than reported under the official measure. Perhaps another methodology would reach a different conclusion.

#### Congressional Budget Office

In January 2025, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) published a new framework for measuring poverty, separate from the OPM and SPM methodologies. The CBO tried to address some shortfalls in the measurements used by the Census Bureau.

First, to more accurately measure income, the CBO linked Census data with tax figures from the Internal Revenue Service. Both measures from the Census Bureau are developed using survey data from the Current Population Survey. Thus, the figures are affected by nonresponses, which have increased over time, and the underreporting of income. For example, according to the CBO, in 1979, about 70% of total spending on SNAP benefits was accounted for in the Current Population Survey; by 2021, that figure was 39%.

Second, the CBO adjusted the way income is measured at the individual level. The Census Bureau uses "family" as the unit of measurement, which includes all legally related people living together. The CBO, instead, uses "household," which can include unrelated adults and children living in the same home. "Households" typically earn more than "families," which has the effect of reducing the percentage of people with income below the poverty level.

Continued on page 34

### PROTECT YOUR ORGANIZATION FROM A CYBER ATTACK



#### Continued from page 33

Third, similar to the Census Bureau's SPM calculations, the CBO accounted for transfer payments such as SNAP, the

Earned Income Tax Credit, and housing benefits.

Finally, the CBO adjusted income thresholds for inflation using the personal consumption expenditures index, which measures a wider "basket of goods" than the CPI-U used by the Census Bureau. It also measures costs more holistically, such as by using actual health care expenditures instead of just the out-of-pocket costs paid by individuals.

With these changes, the CBO found that the percentage of people living in poverty in 2021 (the most recent year for which the CBO has data) was just 0.5%, compared to the Census Bureau's OPM rate of 11.6% and SPM rate of 7.8%.

#### Driving public perception

This exploration of poverty is not to make a claim about which figure is superior or more accurate, or even about the prevalence of poverty. Rather, it stresses the importance of having a basic understanding of how the construction of a top-line measure

like "poverty rate" can change public perception. If the CBO measure is accurate, then the "War on Poverty" has been successful. If the SPM is more accurate, then maybe we should rethink our approach to ending poverty.

More importantly, instead of focusing on which figure is more accurate or relevant, the discussion here serves to highlight the differences in top-line figures that often drive public perception and ultimately public policy. While the OPM is still the measure used in defining eligibility determinations for many programs, other data points are just as valid and useful when designing policies or programs aimed at helping those in poverty. Raw, underlying data that may not be included in commonly reported figures should still play an important role in developing public policy.

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

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FORWARD ANALYTICS

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## Wisconsin Counties Association 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

## **Join Us in Sauk County!**

#### – REGISTRATION AND ROOM BLOCKS OPEN JUNE 2 $\,-$

SUIT UP AND GET READY to join Team WisCo at the 2025 WCA Annual Conference, September 21–23 in Sauk County.

We will team up to bring you state and federal speakers, workshop sessions, and networking opportunities to help you explore the important issues facing Wisconsin county officials.

#### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact the WCA at 866-404-2700 or mail@wicounties.org.

#### Register Online Starting June 2

Registration for the 2025 WCA Annual Conference is online and opens June 2.



To register, visit <u>wicounties.org</u> and click on the "Register Online" icon. This will take you directly to our online registration page, where you can register yourself, as well as any guests, spouses, or additional delegates. Once you have registered, you have the option to pay online with a credit card or have an invoice sent to you via email.

#### Transportation

**Complimentary shuttle service** will be provided on Monday and Tuesday between the participating conference hotels and the Kalahari Resort and Convention Center. Look for a transportation schedule at the WCA registration desk.

#### Reserve Hotel Room Starting June 2

#### Room block start date: June 2

Room block cut-off date: Varies by hotel location

The WCA has room blocks at four hotels in Wisconsin Dells. All room blocks open June 2. County officials are responsible for booking

their own hotel rooms. If booking multiple rooms at any of the WCA-selected hotels, you must have a different name for each reservation. Booking multiple rooms under one name is not allowed. Rooms are booked on a first-come, first-served basis. Visit the conference event page for a complete list of hotel information, rates and registration links.

If you require an accessible room, please contact the WCA at 866-404-2700 to reserve your room by July 16.

#### Spouse & Guest Tour: Upper Dells Boat Tour Monday, Sept. 22 | 9:30 a.m.

On the Upper Dells Boat Tour (a two-hour, slow-moving boat tour), we will journey northward, cruising through an awesome path cut by ancient glaciers, passing under pine-coned cliffs, and navigating through the winding river to view iconic sandstone formations like Chimney Rock, Blackhawk's Profile and Romance Cliff. Our adventure begins with the onshore landing at Witches Gulch, a spectacular and spooky walk through a narrow canyon carved by wind and water, and filled with fern glens, shadowy passages and hidden whirlpool chambers. After the boat tour, we will enjoy lunch in the Crystal Room at Buffalo Phil's Grille. Get ready for a fun-filled day! The bus will return the guests around 2 p.m. □



#### CONCURRENT WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS

The WCA Annual Conference offers concurrent workshops featuring presentations from industry experts and opinion leaders discussing timely issues facing Wisconsin counties. With 30 workshops to choose from, attendees can look forward to a range of informative and engaging topics, including:

- Constitutional officers
- Strategic planning
- County board rules
- Transportation funding
- PFAS
- Long-term care
- Youth justice
- Judicial privacy
- Short-term rental regulation
- Cyber insurance and AI policies
- Cyber incidents
- UW-Madison Division of Extension



## TEAM**'** Wisco

Join us as we celebrate Wisconsin's rich sports culture while emphasizing the values of teamwork and leadership in county government. Just like athletes working together toward victory, county officials must collaborate to lead their communities toward success.

We encourage attendees to show their team spirit by wearing apparel from your favorite sports teams — high school, college or professional, fostering county pride and camaraderie.

We want to see your sports spirit! After registering, you will receive an email encouraging you to send in a photo from your past — whether you were on the field, in the stands or coaching from the sidelines. We'll showcase these memories to highlight the role of teamwork and leadership in sports and in government.

enders larchitects | planners | scientists beter places clean water, infrastructure renewal, mobility



#### CALUMET COUNTY

Nestled in the countryside of Calumet County, the Ariens Nordic Center includes an Olympic biathalon training facility.



## COUNTY STORIES BIG AND SMALL: A Look Back at Season Three

By Michelle Gormican Thompson, Thompson Communications

n season three of Uniquely Wisconsin, the character and history of Lincoln, Calumet, Jefferson, Oconto and Ashland counties were on display. By sharing stories of people, culture, and history through engaging video, broadcast television, audio, podcasts, and social media, "Uniquely Wisconsin" came into its own, acting as a powerful catalyst for local pride, economic growth, and tourism.

"While Uniquely Wisconsin gives counties a chance to showcase well-known stories, it is also a platform for less visible, but equally important stories to be told," said Mark Rose, president of Discover Mediaworks. "Working alongside our team, counties have been able to identify rich, impactful storytelling." Collectively, the stories from the five counties in season three garnered millions of impressions and views.

#### LINCOLN COUNTY

Lincoln County showcased its rich outdoor heritage and community spirit. They featured a local dog musher, who revealed a unique aspect of the county's character beyond traditional tourism, and Chris Schotz, who has worked tirelessly behind the scenes to transform the county's extensive trail systems into a haven for hikers and bikers. The annual Tomahawk Fall Ride, a massive motorcycle event, appeals to a different type of biker and gives the local economy a major boost.

To see season four stories when they debut in September, as well as all three seasons, visit Discover Wisconsin's YouTube page at <u>youtube.com/DiscoverWI</u> and scroll down to the "Uniquely Wisconsin" section. You can also listen to "The Cabin" podcast on your favorite podcast player, where counties in the program are featured. 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.

#### CALUMET COUNTY

Calumet County brought its hidden gems to the forefront with stories about the Ariens Nordic Center, a testament to the county's growing outdoor recreation scene; Terra Verde, a local coffee shop with a big heart; and the Wolf and Fox Winery on the Woelfel Homestead, which is blending agriculture and entrepreneurship.

#### JEFFERSON COUNTY

Jefferson County highlighted its dedication to youth, agricultural traditions, and local craftsmanship. The inspiring story of the Matz Center, a youth stabilization program, showcased the county's commitment to community well-being. The historical significance of the Hoard's Dairyman publication underscored the county's vital role in shaping Wisconsin's dairy industry, while the feature on Trek's Project One bikes highlighted the county's innovative spirit and manufacturing prowess.

#### CONTO COUNTY

Oconto County showcased its diverse landscape and recreational opportunities with a story about the county's extensive ATV and UTV trail systems, appealing to outdoor adventure seekers. The feature on local boat manufacturers, MirroCraft and Montego Bay, underscored the county's economic drivers and skilled workforce, while the story of Braise North placed the county in the epicenter of fine food.

#### ASHLAND COUNTY

Ashland County, nestled in the Chequamegon Bay area, brought its unique blend of natural beauty and historical significance to a wider audience with a closer look at the Bad River Fish Hatchery. Season three also paid homage to the deep traditions of the Bad River Tribe's basket weaving. Finally, the county highlighted how one person can make an impact with the story of Ryan Thimm, a champion for accessibility in the county.

#### A POWERFUL PLATFORM

As preparation for season four continues with filming and production in progress, Uniquely Wisconsin is excited to offer five additional counties a powerful platform to share their stories, amplify their unique identities, and attract



#### JEFFERSON COUNTY

The Matz Center provides numerous resources and a supportive environment for youth experiencing mental health crises.

interest from an audience well beyond their borders.

"For counties, Uniquely Wisconsin's impacts are felt in many ways, from increased tourism and economic activity to a stronger sense of local pride and community spirit," said WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell. "We all know the people, places, and traditions are what make each county special, and we are so proud to be a part of the Uniquely Wisconsin brand."



For more information about PFM's entities and services please go to pfm.com/disclosures.

## NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS



SAVE THE DATES for upcoming webinars: June 25 – July 23 – August 27 – October 22 – November 19 – December 17

### **Build a Foundation of Good Ethics and Avoid Conflicts of Interest**

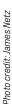
oin us for the June 25 installment of "In the Board Room," where Andy Phillips and the Attolles team will tackle the always interesting topic of ethics and conflicts of interest. Engaging in good ethical conduct and avoiding conflicts of interest seem like laudable and straightforward goals. However, defining the precise boundaries of behavior isn't always easy. During this session, we will explore the legal issues and provide practical insights that, hopefully, will

set you and your county on a course to establishing a solid foundation for county government free from the troubling issues arising from prohibited conduct and impermissible conflicts of interest.

To attend the live webinars, pre-registration is required at bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom25 to receive the webinar link. There is no cost to register. The webinars are recorded and posted on the WCA website at <u>wicounties.org</u>. □

#### Monday County Leadership Meetings EVERY MONDAY AT 11 A.M.

This weekly virtual meeting features updates from the WCA Government Affairs team and Attolles Law, association announcements, and guest speakers, such as state agency staff and legislators. A link to the virtual meeting is emailed to WCA members each week.



#### **Governor's Fishing Opener in Barron County**

Barron County was the site of the 2025 Wisconsin Governor's Fishing Opener in Rice Lake on May 3.

The Wisconsin Governor's Fishing Opener aims to raise awareness about the state's fishing and tourism industries. It brings dignitaries to the area, including cabinet secretaries who join the governor.

The Northwest Wisconsin ITBEC, comprised of 12 counties (Ashland, Bayfield, Barron, Burnett, Chippewa, Douglas, Iron, Polk, Price, Rusk, Sawyer and Washburn), has hosted the event for several years. The WCA is among the sponsors.



#### **Submit Resolutions for** WCA Annual Meeting by 6/23

Each year, counties may submit resolutions for consideration at the WCA Annual Business Meeting, held in conjunction with the WCA Annual Conference in September. Resolutions adopted at the Annual Business Meeting become part of the WCA Platform.

Per the requirements of the WCA Constitution, all resolutions must be submitted to the WCA office no later than 4:30 p.m. on Monday, June 23, 2025, to be considered at the 2025 Annual Business Meeting, which is scheduled for Sept. 21 in Sauk County.

To submit a resolution, contact Sarah Diedrick-Kasdorf, WCA Director of Outreach and Member Engagement, at 608-663-7188 or diedrick@wicounties.org.

See page 39 of the April 2025 issue of Wisconsin Counties for full submission criteria and instructions.

## With Safety in Mind, County Mutual's ODIP Presents Dividend Check to Waushara County

he Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation's Owner Direct Insurance Program has again paid off, with Waushara County recently receiving a dividend check for nearly \$200,000 for the construction of its new government center and highway shop.

"The ODIP is a cost-saving insurance product that allows County Mutual member counties to take control of their workers' compensation insurance needs on building projects such as jails, law enforcement centers, and courthouses," said Vance Forrest, vice president of risk management for Charles Taylor, which administers County Mutual. "Our team conducts the program administration, regular safety visits, and on-site training."

Only two minor workers' compensation claims were filed during the Waushara County projects. As a result, the county was awarded a significant dividend.

"Workers' compensation insurance for trades and contractors can have a high cost. But well-managed projects, like the Waushara County ones, can recover up to half of the premium as a dividend by participating in the ODIP," said Forrest. "Alongside the Samuels Group, we were able to execute our safety plan, and a lot of people went home safe and sound." □

#### Platteville Wins 2025 Wis. Civics Games

A team from Platteville High School took first place in the 2025 Wisconsin Civics Games state championship at the state Capitol in May. Each of the team members will receive a \$2,000 scholarship to a Wisconsin college or university.

More than 200 students on 49 teams from 27 schools in Wisconsin competed at this year's Civics Games.

The games were launched in 2018 by the WNA Foundation to fuel civic participation after data revealed municipalities across the state were having trouble filling local elected positions in their communities. Since then, the competition has continued to grow. The games are co-sponsored by the WCA. □



Left to right: Brian Winter, Samuels Group assistant project manager; Vance Forrest, vice president of risk management for Charles Taylor and administrator for Wisconsin County Mutual; John Jarvis, Waushara County Board chair and a member of the Wisconsin County Mutual Board of Directors; Kurt Berner, Samuels Group vice president; and Tim Nordlund, Samuels Group senior project manager.

## amazon business

#### **Prime Exclusive Offer for WCA Members**

The WCA has partnered with Amazon Business for a new, exclusive program. WCA member counties and their departments are now eligible to sign up for a free Amazon Business Prime membership that includes free and fast shipping, a pre-approved line of credit, and a 25% discount on select office, maintenance, repair, operational and IT products. WCA members can also leverage a competitively awarded contract by OMNIA Partners to purchase on Amazon Business across all categories for additional savings. Contact the WCA for more information.

#### **Local Government Summit June 19**

Spend the day in Appleton learning about artificial intelligence, the latest in cybersecurity, and how to establish and strengthen your social media presence. The one-day summit is sponsored by the Local Government Institute of Wisconsin, which includes the WCA. For more information and to register, visit localgovinstitute.org/events.

### Federal Update

# Potential Federal Medicaid Cuts: The Impact on Wisconsin

By the Wisconsin Department of Health Services

isconsin's Medicaid programs are essential to our state's health care system and economy. However, Congress is currently considering massive cuts to Medicaid. While the final details of these proposals remain uncertain, substantial impacts on Medicaid and other health programs are unavoidable in order to achieve the \$880 billion in cuts envisioned in the U.S. House of Representatives budget blueprint. These cuts by Congress would shift costs to Wisconsin, slash the Medicaid budget, and make services harder for working adults to access.

"Wisconsin's Medicaid program is an essential part of our state's health care and public health systems and economy," said Wisconsin Medicaid Director Bill Hanna. "Simply put, we can't have a healthy and strong Wisconsin without a healthy and strong Medicaid program. Massive cuts like those proposed by Congress would put our people, our health care system, and our economy at risk."

Medicaid in Wisconsin goes by many names, including BadgerCare Plus, Family Care, IRIS (Include, Respect, I Self-Direct), Katie Beckett, Family Care Partnership, PACE (Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly), and Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS) Waiver Program.

Wisconsin's Medicaid program provides health insurance benefits and long-term care to residents across the state. Medicaid covers 20% of all Wisconsinites, including 40% of births, 38% of children, and 60% of people in nursing homes. BadgerCare Plus is the state's largest Medicaid program, with roughly I million members, and covers preventive care, urgent care and emergency room visits, vaccinations, prescriptions, and more.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services has analyzed three congressional policy proposals and how these cuts to Medicaid might impact the people and providers in our state.

#### Per-person funding cap

Funding for the Medicaid program is shared between the federal government and states where, currently, the federal government reimburses the state at a set percentage of all eligible Medicaid costs. This arrangement allows state budgets to cope with unforeseen circumstances, such as economic downturns or faster-than-expected increases in medical costs. Congress may limit federal funding for Medicaid members at a set dollar amount for each enrollee, rather than paying

#### What Does Medicaid Cover in Wisconsin?

One of every five Wisconsinites Two of every five Wisconsin births Two of every five Wisconsin kids Three of every five people in a Wisconsin nursing home for a percentage of costs. This change would squeeze state budgets and put Wisconsin taxpayers on the hook if medical costs rise quickly, with cuts to benefits and provider payments.

**Potential impact:** Wisconsin would lose up to \$16.8 billion in federal funding over a 10-year period.



#### LEARN MORE

The full DHS report analyzing the impact of potential Medicaid cuts on Wisconsin can be found on the DHS website at <u>bit.ly/WI-DHS-Medicaid</u>.

The National Association of Counties has a dedicated webpage, "Federal Reforms to Medicaid Financing: What Counties Should Know," at <u>bit.ly/Medicaid-Cuts-Counties</u>. a health condition. Congress may impose new red-tape requirements on hard-working Wisconsinites, making it even more difficult for them to get health care coverage. DHS assumes that a Congressional requirement to prove that Medicaid members are working would be similar to requirements already in place for able-bodied adults

Medicaid infrastructure cuts

The federal government and states also share the administrative costs of running Medicaid programs. This includes functions like determining eligibility for members, staffing to review claims, pay providers, and prevent fraud, and investing in information technology systems.

Congress may cut the amount of federal money provided to states to support these vital functions. These changes would make it difficult to fund current and future efforts to run Medicaid efficiently and effectively, and to eliminate fraud, waste, and abuse.

**Potential impact:** Wisconsin would see increased annual costs of up to \$93 million.

## More barriers to coverage and increased cost to taxpayers

Many Wisconsinites with Medicaid work in jobs that don't offer health insurance. Many others can't work because of



without dependent children in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

In late 2024, Wisconsin Medicaid enrolled approximately 191,000 adults without dependent children per month. Roughly 52,000 of these members would be at the highest risk for losing eligibility. These requirements would also cost up to \$6 million annually in administrative costs due to increased paperwork and additional staff time. Wisconsin could also choose to offer employment and training services to Medicaid members to help them meet work requirements, which would be an additional \$60 million per year.

**Potential impact:** In Wisconsin, 52,000 people are highly likely to lose health care coverage and the state would have added costs of up to \$65.6 million annually.

#### Medicaid Cited as a Top Concern of County Officials

In a recent interview with Governing magazine, NACo Executive Director Matt Chase cited Medicaid funding as one of the top items county officials are worried about.



"We have counties in over 25 states that have a direct role in Medicaid. We help determine eligibility in some states and then counties own about 1,000 public hospitals, 700 long-term care facilities, including nursing homes, skilled nursing, and our behavioral health and public health authorities," said Chase.

Read the full interview at <u>bit.ly/Governing-Chase</u>.

#### **WCA Advocacy Call to Action**

The WCA urges county officials to contact their members of Congress to educate them about how the potential Medicaid funding cuts will impact their residents.





## **Court of Appeals Clarifies Procedure for Closed Session**

By Andy Phillips, Ben Conard and Jake Apostolu, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.

he Wisconsin Open Meetings Law ensures transparency and accountability to the electorate by providing the public with the right to attend meetings of governmental bodies so the public has access to "the fullest and most complete information regarding the affairs of government as is compatible with the conduct of governmental business."<sup>1</sup> As such, every meeting of a governmental body must initially be convened in open session, and all business of any kind, formal or informal, must be initiated, discussed, and acted upon in open session unless one of the exemptions permitting a closed session applies.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, the Wisconsin Court of Appeals examined the "bargaining exemption" under Wis. Stat. § 19.85(I)(e) in State ex rel. Oitzinger v. City of Marinette & Marinette Common Council.<sup>3</sup> The bargaining exemption allows a governmental body to convene in closed session for the purpose of "deliberating or negotiating the purchasing of public properties, the investing of public funds, or conducting other specified public business, whenever competitive or bargaining reasons require a closed session." In the Oitzinger decision, which will be examined in this article, the court's holdings affirmed and clarified the rules regarding the due notice, calling, and conduct of closed sessions of meetings of governmental bodies under the Wisconsin Open Meetings Law.

#### Background

In the late 2010s, Tyco Fire Products, L.P. was responsible for introducing certain toxic PFAS<sup>4</sup> into the city of Marinette's groundwater by flushing its firefighting foam down Marinette's sanitary sewers into the local wastewater treatment plant and discharging it into the surrounding environment.<sup>5</sup> Tyco's conduct resulted in a two-fold issue for Marinette. First, PFAS contaminated the wastewater biosolids produced in Marinette's wastewater treatment process, which had traditionally been repurposed as crop fertilizer, leaving Marinette liable for finding a safe disposal alternative.<sup>6</sup> Second, PFAS contaminated the well water in the neighboring town of Peshtigo.<sup>7</sup>

At the direction of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Tyco hired a consultant to draft a "Remedial Actions Options Report for Long-Term Drinking Water Supply, Town of Peshtigo" to identify eight long-term drinking water supply alternatives.<sup>8</sup> The report ultimately recommended that affected residences in Peshtigo be connected to the Marinette public water system.<sup>9</sup> In response, Tyco and Marinette entered into two reimbursement agreements: one for Tyco to pay the costs of dehydrating and shipping the contaminated biosolids to a landfill in the state of Oregon; and the second for Tyco to pay Marinette \$75,000 for legal and consulting costs related to providing water service to Peshtigo.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the initial assistance, Marinette still needed a long-term, cost-effective solution for disposing of the contaminated biosolids. The proposed solution was a "donation agreement" between Marinette and Tyco whereby Tyco would pay for Marinette to buy its own equipment for dehydrating the contaminated biosolids prior to being shipped away.<sup>11</sup> Marinette's city attorney "...the decision clarifies that the bargaining exemption only applies to portions of meetings where the government's competitive or bargaining reasons leave "no other option than to close [such] meetings."

negotiated the terms of the donation agreement over the course of four months.<sup>12</sup> Only the mayor of Marinette and the city utilities operations manager provided any substantive input to the donation agreement.<sup>13</sup>

On Oct. 5, 2020, the mayor — relying on the bargaining exemption — posted notice of a closed session for a portion of the Marinette Common Council's Oct. 6 meeting relating to the donation agreement.<sup>14</sup> No discussion of the donation agreement occurred on the record before the council immediately voted to convene in closed session, and council members were provided copies of the donation agreement for the first time at the start of the closed session.<sup>15</sup> During the closed session, the city attorney and utilities operations manager provided an overview of the donation agreement and disposal plans.<sup>16</sup>

When Douglas Oitzinger, who was an alderperson serving on the common council at the time of the closed sessions, asked what extra costs Marinette would incur in connection with the plan and whether more money should be sought from Tyco, the attorney responded that "they had finished negotiating and they believed [it] was the best deal they could get."<sup>17</sup> The council then returned to open session, and without further discussion, voted eight-to-one to approve the donation agreement with Oitzinger dissenting.<sup>18</sup>

As for providing water service to Peshtigo, the common council retained Ruekert & Mielke, Inc. to draft a memo identifying the operational, financial and legal challenges posed by the drinking water report alternatives.<sup>19</sup> The memo was provided to the city attorney on July 9, 2020, but it was never provided to the council or the mayor.<sup>20</sup> On Oct. 6, 2020, a public notice announced that on Oct. 7, the council would conduct a "discussion with legal counsel regarding the status of [the] water supply alternative analysis.<sup>21</sup>

When the Oct. 7 meeting began, the common council moved immediately after roll call to convene in closed session without any discussion of the memo on the record.<sup>22</sup> The consultant and the city attorney proceeded to provide the council a broad synopsis of the technical

and water quality issues, along with the economic and political issues surrounding the memo.<sup>23</sup> At the end of the presentation, the council voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting without further action.<sup>24</sup>

#### Legal action and analysis

Subsequent to the meetings, Oitzinger filed an action under Wis. Stat. § 19.79(1) alleging that the Oct. 6 and 7 closed sessions were illegal.<sup>25</sup> The Court of Appeals agreed with Oitzinger and held that the Marinette Common Council violated the Wisconsin Open Meetings Law at the Oct. 6 and 7 meetings because (1) the council failed to hold discussions relating to the subject matter of the closed sessions in open session prior to voting to go into closed sessions, and (2) there was no competitive or bargaining reason to enter into closed sessions for either meeting because negotiations of the donation agreement had already been conducted, and there was no negotiation yet underway with Peshtigo to re-route water.<sup>26</sup>

Relying on case law interpreting the Wisconsin Open Meetings Law,<sup>27</sup> the court reaffirmed the concept that a governmental body must (1) begin its discussions in an open session, (2) place the initial discussion of the subject matter on the record, and (3) describe why a specific topic within that discussion requires a closed session prior to voting to go into closed session.<sup>28</sup> In the Oitzinger decision, the court reasoned that the public deserved to know the conclusions offered by the city attorney, utilities operations manager, mayor, and consultant in each respective meeting insofar as such conclusions didn't implicate sensitive negotiation points.<sup>29</sup>

As such, the court opined that in each meeting, the council should have heard the presentations from the city attorney, utilities operations manager, mayor, or consultant, respectively, and asked questions in open session. If the council determined that conditions or payment terms needed to be discussed, the council could have then moved into closed session.<sup>30</sup>

Continued on page 46



#### Continued from page 45

This court ruling reiterates that county officials must remain vigilant to ensure they are providing adequate notice and a meaningful discussion of items to be bargained or negotiated prior to entering closed sessions. However, the Oitzinger decision in no way requires governmental bodies to disclose negotiation strategies or other sensitive information in open session. Rather, the decision clarifies that the bargaining exemption only applies to portions of meetings where the government's competitive or bargaining reasons leave "no other option than to close [such] meetings."<sup>31</sup>

Determining exactly when it is appropriate or necessary to close a meeting can be a challenging consideration, but county officials can alleviate much of the difficulty if they adhere to the holdings enumerated above and regularly consult the Wisconsin Open Meetings Law Compliance Guide (accessible at <u>bit.ly/DOJ-OML</u>) and their corporation counsel. County officials are encouraged to work closely with their corporation counsel in drafting closed session agenda items and clear procedures for convening in closed session.

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. § 19.81(1).
- 2. Wis. Stat. § 19.83.
- 3. State ex rel. Oitzinger v. City of Marinette, 2025 WI App 19.
- 4. Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) "are widely used, long lasting chemicals, components of which break down very slowly over time." U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY, PFAS Explained, https://www.epa.gov/pfas/pfas-explained (last visited May 5, 2025). "Scientific studies have shown that exposure to some PFAS in the environment may be linked to harmful health effects in humans and animals." Id.
- State ex rel. Oitzinger v. City of Marinette & Marinette Common Council, 2025 WI App 19 ¶ 4. (2025).
- State ex rel. Oitzinger v. City of Marinette & Marinette Common Council at ¶ 5.
- 7. ld. at ¶ 6.
- 8. ld. at ¶ 5.
- 9. ld. at ¶ 6.
- 10. ld. at ¶ 7.
- 10. iu. at || 7.

 Id. at ¶13.
Id. at ¶14.
Id. at ¶15.
Id. at ¶16.
Id. at ¶16.
Id. at ¶17.
Id. at ¶17.
Id. at ¶19.
Id. at ¶19.
Id. at ¶154; 66.
See State ex rel. Citizens for Responsible Development v. City of Milton, 2007 WI App 114.
Oitzinger at ¶38.
Id. at ¶70.
Id. at ¶71.

11. ld. at ¶ 8.

12. ld. at ¶ 9.

14. ld. at ¶10.

15. ld. at ¶11.

17. ld. at ¶12.

31. ld. at ¶ 32.

13. ld.

16. ld.





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The success of WCA Services, Inc. is due in part to our insistence on high corporate standards from companies that provide counties and other public entities with meaningful solutions. Explore programs and services offered through both WCA Services, Inc. and the Wisconsin Counties Association at www.wcasi.com.

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