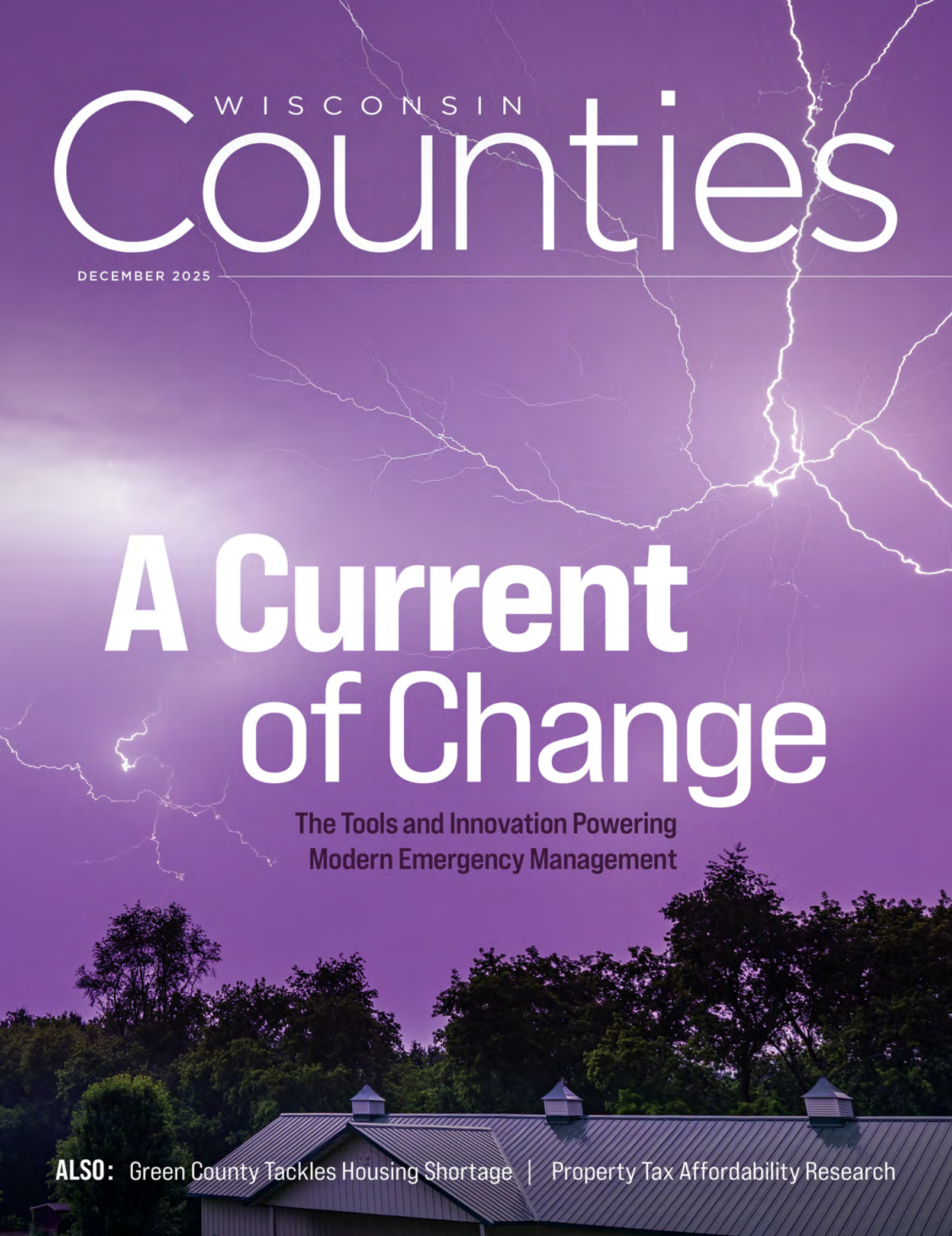




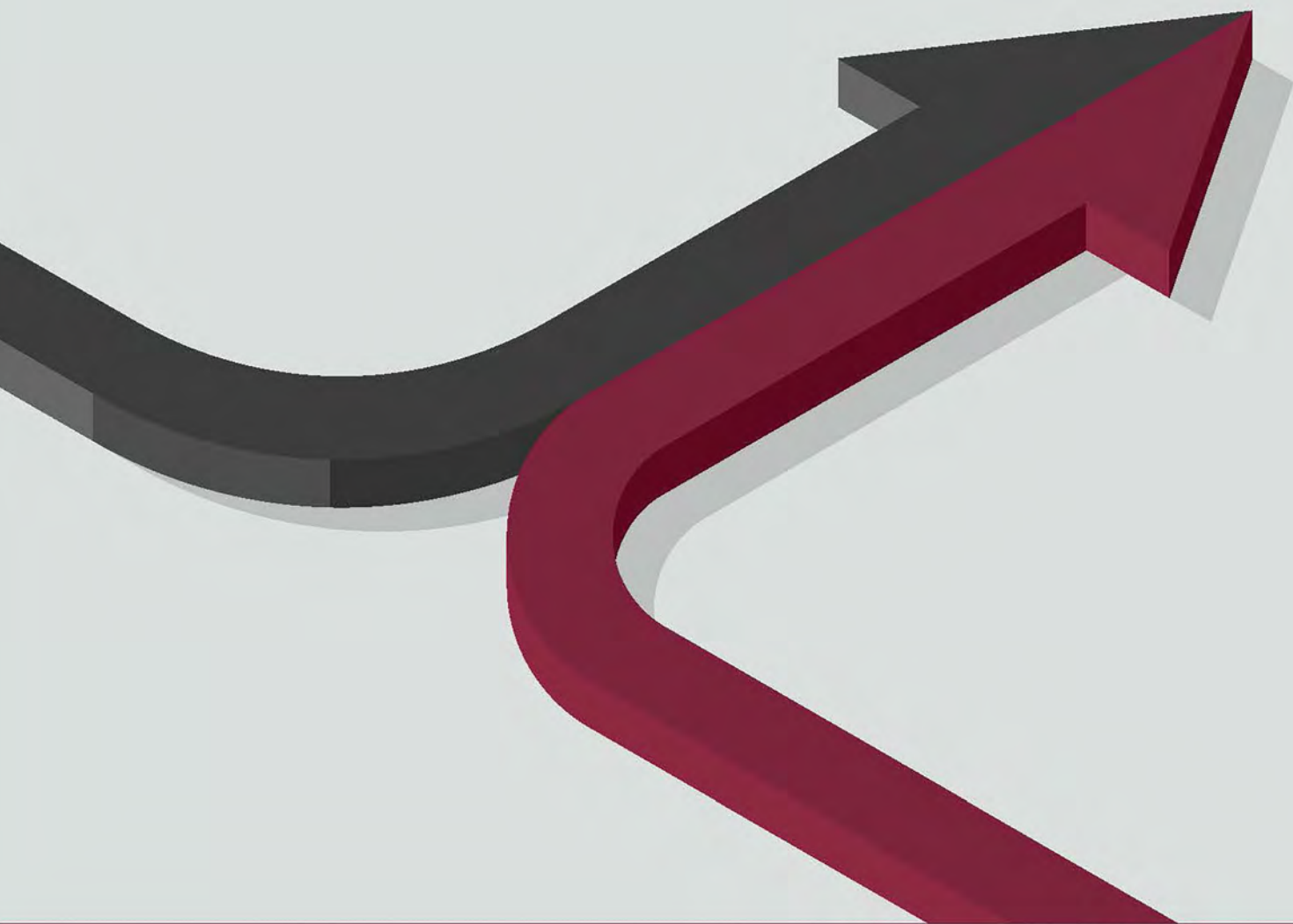
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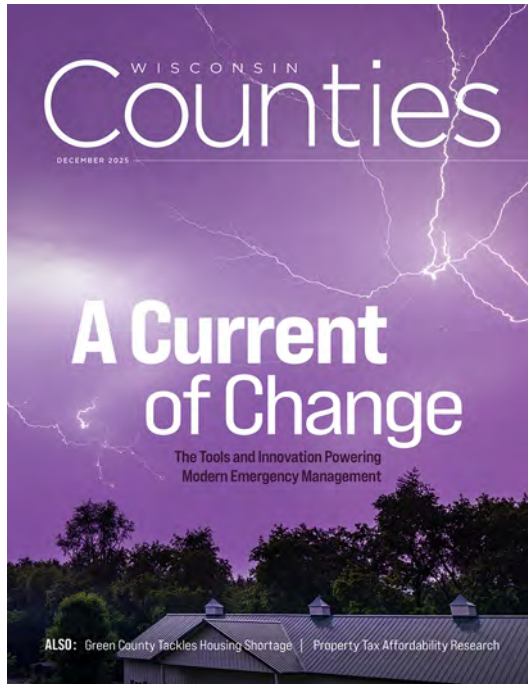
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From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

/ President & CEO

The Power of Forward Analytics

Shaping Decisions, Strengthening Counties

When the Wisconsin Counties Association launched Forward Analytics in 2018, the goal was clear: to provide counties — and all of Wisconsin — with reliable, nonpartisan research to facilitate sound public policy. Counties needed a trusted source of data and analysis to help them make decisions grounded in facts, not politics.

Forward Analytics was created to meet that need, and since then, it has grown into Wisconsin's most respected policy research organization. Its reports are not only widely cited in the media but also regularly used by state and local policymakers to shape solutions. Its clear-eyed analysis has deepened understanding of Wisconsin's demographic shifts, fiscal health and economic realities.

The driving idea behind Forward Analytics has always been that good data leads to good governance. Whether it's examining workforce challenges, housing shortages, child care gaps, or population trends, the organization's work helps decision-makers see the bigger picture and understand how state and local issues intersect. That kind of insight has enabled counties to be proactive and anticipate challenges, not just react to them.

Forward Analytics also reflects one of the core strengths of Wisconsin's counties: the commitment to collaboration and problem-solving. County leaders have long known that meaningful change happens when decisions are based on

facts and when every level of government works together. Forward Analytics embodies that spirit, bridging the gap between research and real-world application.

The organization's growth is a testament to both its mission and the vision of its leadership. Under the direction of Dale Knapp, Forward Analytics established its credibility and built a foundation for continued success. His dedication to rigorous, objective analysis has earned the trust of policymakers and the public alike. Now, as the organization enters a new chapter with Dale's retirement at the end of this year, that foundation will serve it well.

As we look ahead, we do so with gratitude for the leadership that built Forward Analytics and with great confidence in the organization's continued role in helping Wisconsin move forward, together. Forward Analytics, under the direction of Kevin Dospoy, the current deputy director, is poised to continue evolving, expanding its reach and deepening its impact.

With an ever-changing policy landscape, the need for clear, unbiased research will only grow. The work Forward Analytics does today will inform the decisions that shape Wisconsin's tomorrow. Counties — and indeed, the entire state — benefit from having such a reliable partner in understanding the challenges ahead and finding pathways forward. ■

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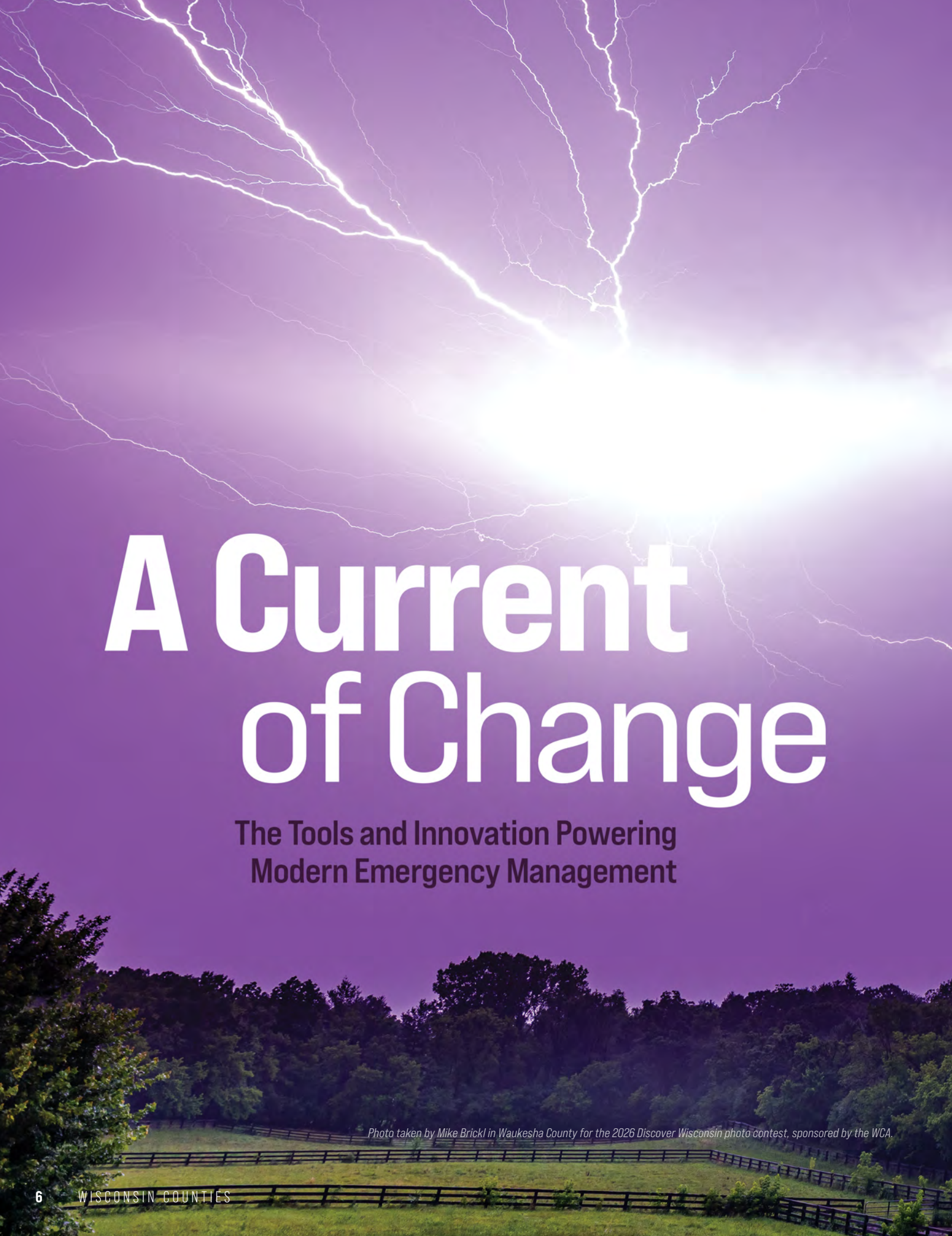
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A Current of Change

The Tools and Innovation Powering
Modern Emergency Management

Photo taken by Mike Brickl in Waukesha County for the 2026 Discover Wisconsin photo contest, sponsored by the WCA.



EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Constraints and Opportunities

By Tyler Esh, Emergency Manager, Eau Claire County, and Immediate Past President, Wisconsin Emergency Management Association

In the last two years, Wisconsin has experienced 84 tornadoes, a \$100 million flood event, multiple hazardous materials incidents, thousands of transportation accidents, and numerous active shooter events. These are the types of crises your county emergency management staff work tirelessly to prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate. Emergency management is your worst-case-scenario planner, but the growing number of incidents, coupled with minimal and often inexperienced staff, is taking a toll.

Across the state and the nation, emergency management departments tend to have limited budgets and are expected to “do more with less.” Emergency management teams maintain 24/7 on-call coverage, but in many counties, those teams consist of just one person. That lack of depth leaves little room for extended vacancies, illnesses, or shared workload during major disasters.

A recent national study conducted by Argonne National Laboratory, in partnership with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and several trade associations, found that more than three-quarters of respondents (cities, counties, tribes and states) have two or fewer full-time



employees dedicated to emergency management.

Half of the respondents also reported that their emergency managers have other duties, such as managing dispatch centers or overseeing emergency medical services.

With each duty carrying its own grant and statutory requirements, it can be difficult to find adequate time to prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies.

Funding has long been a challenge in emergency management, but recent and proposed cuts have intensified concerns. Several years ago, the federal Emergency Management Performance Grant, which provides resources to implement national preparedness, was reduced by 10%. Now, the federal government plans to eliminate funding for Healthcare Emergency Readiness Coalitions, which help hospitals, emergency medical services, emergency management, and other health-related organizations coordinate during major incidents. In addition, significant reductions are expected to the Public Health Emergency Preparedness Program. When this funding disappears, the work does not. The responsibilities remain, stretching already limited local capacity even further.

Continued on page 8

Funding has long been a challenge in emergency management, but recent and proposed cuts have intensified concerns ... When this funding disappears, the work does not.

Continued from page 7

Subsequent articles in this series will explore emergency management planning and core tools, as well as emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and expanded GIS capabilities. These innovations have the potential to transform emergency management, but they require sustained investment.

The Wisconsin Emergency Management division of the Department of Military Affairs offers three levels of certification: basic, professional, and advanced professional. The International Association of Emergency Managers provides globally recognized credentials that further strengthen expertise. But professional growth and training require commitment and funding.

Recently, Waukesha County sent staff members to FEMA's National Disaster and Emergency Management University in Maryland for a four-day exercise designed

to rigorously test the county's emergency plans. External evaluations like these remove self-assessment bias and provide invaluable independent feedback, but they require investment as well.

As county leaders make budget decisions, it's worth checking in with your emergency management team. Ask where the greatest concerns lie, what the worst-case scenario might be and, perhaps most importantly, what keeps them up at night. Emergency management professionals understand the financial realities counties face, but no one wants their program mentioned in a national after-action report. The key is ensuring that county leadership and elected officials fully understand which vulnerabilities could lead to that kind of heartache and investing now to prevent it. ■

Tyler Esh is the emergency manager for Eau Claire County and the immediate past president of the Wisconsin Emergency Management Association.

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PLANNING and RESPONSE

The Core Tools of County Emergency Management

*By Brandon Larson, Director of Emergency Management, Vernon County, and
President, Wisconsin Emergency Management Association*

Planning lies at the heart of emergency management. County emergency managers create and maintain numerous plans that guide how to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. The cornerstone is the Emergency Operations Plan, a flexible, scalable framework that directs how the county will respond to various incidents.

Other essential plans include the Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan, which is required under federal law and identifies risks and strategies to reduce disaster impacts before they occur; Continuity of Operations/Continuity of Government Plans, which ensure essential services and government functions continue during a crisis; and the Active Threat Coordinated Response Guidance, which outlines a consistent, joint approach for fire, emergency medical services, and law enforcement agencies to respond to active threats.

Every county is required by state statute and grant conditions to have an emergency manager. They often face similar challenges and can benefit from shared solutions. Integrated Preparedness Plans, for example, are one- to three-year, partner-driven strategies that identify common priorities across local agencies, such as municipalities, schools and public safety organizations. When neighboring counties align these priorities, they can “divide and conquer,” saving time and maximizing resources.

Developing regional plans for areas like family assistance centers, reunification, disaster recovery, and

emergency operations center management can reduce the burden on individual counties. Participation in regional and state incident management teams, including the Wisconsin State Mutual Aid Compact, further strengthens local capabilities by pooling expertise and resources statewide.

No plan is static. Each is continually updated to reflect new threats, lessons learned and changing community resources.

Without these and other plans, response efforts can become fragmented, delayed or ineffective. Emergency managers regularly review, test and refine them through exercises and training.



Brandon Larson



► Response operations

Counties organize emergency response through the Incident Command System, a nationally recognized structure that enables responders from multiple agencies to work together under a clear chain of command with defined roles and responsibilities. The system’s flexibility allows operations to scale up or down depending on the type and size of an incident.

Each county also identifies an emergency operations center as the coordination hub where county officials, public safety agencies, public works, health departments, and other

partners convene during emergencies. Decision-makers and resource managers meet, either in person or virtually, to ensure a unified, countywide response. Emergency operations centers vary across Wisconsin. In Vernon County, for example, it doubles as the county boardroom. In others, it may be a conference room or a dedicated facility.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of maintaining both physical and virtual capabilities. Early in the pandemic, many counties met in person. As the crisis evolved, operations transitioned online, relying on secure, reliable technology to keep decision-makers connected.

► Monitoring tools

Situational awareness is critical in any emergency. Emergency managers rely on a variety of monitoring tools to understand what's happening, where, and the impact on communities.

Counties use WebEOC, a statewide digital system that enables local officials to track incidents, share updates and request resources. It also gives the Wisconsin Emergency Management agency real-time visibility into local operations, reducing the need for frequent check-ins and streamlining coordination.

Weather and threat monitoring systems are equally essential. Partnerships with the National Weather Service, law enforcement intelligence networks, and regional alerting systems provide timely, accurate warnings that help keep the public safe.

► Communication and coordination

Emergencies demand fast, accurate communication with the public. Mass notifications, social media, websites and traditional news outlets all play a role in sharing vital

information before, during and after disasters.

Equally important is two-way communication, ensuring residents can ask questions, request help or share information with county officials. Investing in communication platforms builds public trust and ensures messages are received and acted upon.

Preparedness doesn't end with planning; it's achieved through practice. County emergency managers conduct regular trainings and exercises with local staff, first responders, schools, hospitals and community partners. These drills test plans, identify gaps and build working relationships before disaster strikes.

Community outreach and education are also key. When residents are informed and prepared, county resources can focus on the most critical needs during a crisis.

► Conclusion

Emergency management is a core function of local government, protecting lives, property and the continuity of community life. The tools outlined here — planning frameworks, the Incident Command System, emergency operations centers, monitoring technologies, communication platforms, and training programs — form the backbone of that work.

But tools alone aren't enough. They require investment, support and leadership to be effective. For county associations and policymakers, recognizing the importance of these systems and providing the resources emergency managers need is not only prudent, it's a responsibility to the residents we all serve. ■

Brandon Larson is the director of emergency management for Vernon County and president of the Wisconsin Emergency Management Association. He is a certified emergency manager in Wisconsin as well as an associate emergency manager through the International Association of Emergency Managers.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT TOOLBOX



**Planning
Frameworks**



**Incident
Command
System**



**Emergency
Operations
Centers**



**Monitoring
Technologies**



**Communication
Platforms**



**Training
Programs**

From Data to Decisions

How AI Is Transforming Emergency Management

By Tyler J. Verhasselt, Director of Emergency Management, Lincoln County

Wisconsin's emergency management community has long operated on ingenuity and grit. But as hazards grow more complex, spanning cyber threats, severe weather, and infrastructure vulnerabilities, time and bandwidth have become as valuable as any grant dollar.

As observed in research on disaster management, artificial intelligence extends the decision-making and operational capacity of humans in complex disaster environments.¹ In practice, that means automating the tasks that consume valuable staff hours, such as drafting plan language, analyzing after-action data or consolidating grant reporting.

For smaller or rural counties, these tools can level the playing field. AI enables small teams to generate the same quality of analysis and planning once available only to larger jurisdictions. In a field where efficiency equates to readiness, that is a transformative advantage.

AI's greatest strength lies in how it turns raw information into actionable insight. Research from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and industry software providers Juvare and Esri highlights how practical AI applications enhance county operations across preparedness, response and recovery.

► Emergency plan drafting and review

Natural-language AI tools are accelerating how emergency managers update emergency operation plans, annexes, and continuity documents. Even more importantly, they enhance cross-functional, multidisciplinary collaboration

during those reviews.

Online platforms offer shared, cloud-based environments where emergency management, public health, law enforcement, fire service, and public works can collaborate in real time. With tools that automate compliance tracking, make smart notifications, and review plans to align with industry standards, these platforms translate to faster planning cycles, reduced administrative burden, and higher-quality plans.



Tyler Verhasselt

► Predictive analytics

AI-driven predictive models help identify patterns invisible to traditional analysis. FEMA's AI Use Case Framework shows how machine learning can forecast hazard behavior and infrastructure risk, turning historical data into forward-looking intelligence.²

Picture models that anticipate floodplain breaches based on rainfall, soil saturation and topography allow emergency managers to identify vulnerable areas before a disaster strikes and guide mitigation efforts such as zoning or floodplain management. Similarly, wildfire projections that consider vegetation, humidity and wind direction can strengthen prevention and response planning. These

insights can guide resource staging, evacuation planning and interagency coordination.

By embracing predictive analytics, Wisconsin's emergency managers can shift from a reactive posture to proactive readiness.

► **Damage assessment**

When disaster strikes, time is the most precious commodity. AI accelerates damage assessment, turning limited data and resources into fast, informed decisions that sharpen response and maximize impact. Esri's geospatial AI satellite and aerial imagery, combined with machine learning, for instance, can rapidly identify damaged structures, blocked roads and impacted infrastructure.

AI-enhanced assessments also streamline public assistance documentation and strengthen situational awareness, creating a more unified and accurate common operating picture across multiple agencies. These tools integrate seamlessly with floodplain mapping and mitigation planning, providing a stronger foundation for both immediate recovery and long-term resilience.

Integrating these insights into standard operating practices allows counties to quickly link assessment data to resource allocation, shortening response and recovery timelines and ensuring that decisions are based on an accurate, data-driven understanding of damage.

► **Policy, governance and the road ahead**

The promise of AI is powerful, but its success depends on thoughtful implementation. As FEMA cautions, AI must be governed, trained and trusted to be effective.³

For Wisconsin, that means creating a framework that blends innovation with accountability. This framework should prioritize data governance to ensure privacy, security and ethical use of local data while also emphasizing workforce training so staff can interpret AI outputs and maintain human oversight. It must align local, state and federal policy expectations to support responsible AI use and include sustainable funding mechanisms that build AI adoption into multiyear budgets rather than short-term pilots.

Developing this framework will require collaboration among all stakeholders. Joint standards can help define ethical guardrails, training benchmarks, and shared-service

models — ensuring all counties, regardless of size or resources, can participate in AI adoption.

► **Smarter, not harder**

AI cannot replace the judgment, empathy or community knowledge of Wisconsin's emergency managers, but it can bolster their impact.

AI helps us do more with less, and more importantly, it helps us do better with what we have. From planning to recovery, it enhances the efficiency, accuracy and collaboration that define resilient counties. Embracing AI will not make disasters less complex, but it will make our responses smarter, faster and more resilient. ■

Tyler Verhasselt serves as the director of emergency management for Lincoln County, where he leads preparedness, response and safety initiatives that strengthen community resilience. With a background in military services, his career spans more than two decades of leading cross-functional teams, driving readiness and advancing organizational effectiveness.

1. Patrick Roberts, "How AI Is Changing Our Approach to Disasters," RAND, Aug. 27, 2025, bit.ly/RAND_AI_Approach.
2. "Federal Emergency Management Agency – AI Use Cases," Department of Homeland Security, bit.ly/FEMA_AI_Use_Case.
3. Id.

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SEEING THE WHOLE PICTURE

The Importance of GIS

By Valerie Desio, Emergency Management Specialist, Eau Claire County

Emergency managers, like all county officials, are constantly asked to stretch limited resources. Technology can help, especially tools that provide real-time awareness and support faster, informed decisions.

That's where geographic information systems, or GIS, come in.

GIS transforms raw data into clear, visual insights, connecting information to location and helping officials understand where things are and how they relate to one another. Counties rely on GIS for everything from parcel mapping and 911 addressing to infrastructure planning, natural resource management, and emergency response. While those traditional uses remain essential, the true value of GIS extends far beyond mapping. Today's systems help counties visualize risk, coordinate services and make informed decisions using data they already collect. Yet, these capabilities often go underutilized simply because leadership may not realize how broadly GIS can strengthen county operations.

In emergency management, GIS plays an especially critical role. During a disaster, maps are more than just visuals, they're decision tools. They show where roads are closed, which facilities are impacted, where vulnerable

populations live, and how resources are being deployed. When county leaders support GIS capacity, they're helping emergency management and strengthening every department that depends on accurate, shared information during a crisis.

However, like many county functions, GIS departments are balancing competing priorities. They're maintaining parcel layers, updating infrastructure maps, and supporting 911 systems—all with limited staff and tight budgets. It's not that emergency managers don't want to use GIS more, it's that GIS teams are already stretched thin.

That's why leadership support makes such a difference. When counties invest in GIS licenses, staff training and cross-departmental collaboration, they unlock capabilities that pay off far beyond emergency management. Many GIS platforms already include ready-made solutions for preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation. For example, the software provider Esri offers out-of-the-box emergency management dashboards and situational awareness tools that integrate easily with existing county data. Counties that are already using Esri for land records or addressing can often expand access to emergency management functions without major new expenses.

Strategic alignment is where county leadership plays a crucial role.



Valerie Desio



Today's GIS systems help counties visualize risk, coordinate services and make informed decisions using data they already collect.

bring operational insight. When those perspectives come together, the results are smarter maps, stronger coordination and better outcomes.

Beyond county borders, collaboration with neighboring jurisdictions, state partners and professional associations can reveal tools

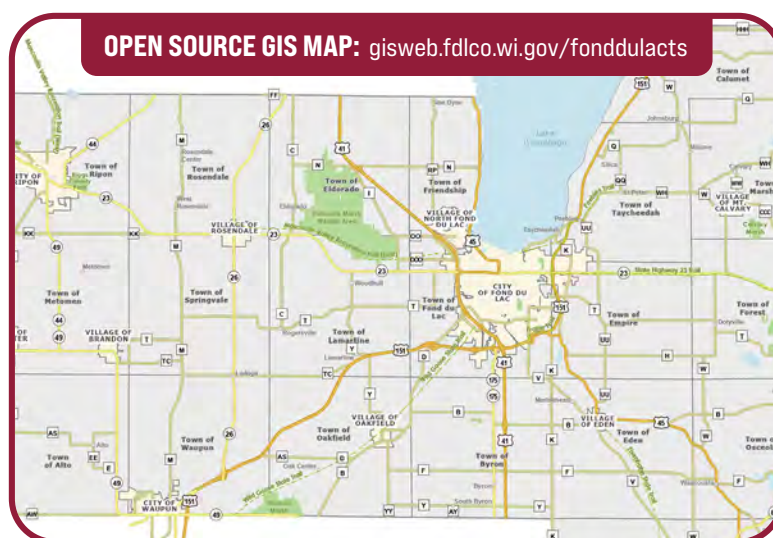
and approaches in use elsewhere. At GIS and emergency management conferences, staff can see firsthand how other counties visualize hazards, manage assets and integrate data into daily operations. These connections often spark ideas that can be replicated or scaled, saving both time and money.

GIS doesn't just support county services; it connects them. County boards and administrators play a key role in ensuring that GIS remains a shared resource that serves every department. Supporting staff training, prioritizing data maintenance and encouraging cross-department collaboration all help maximize the county's investment.

discussions. When data is visualized and shared, it brings clarity to complex issues and helps ensure decisions are grounded in real information.

Collaboration is another critical piece. Even as GIS tools become more accessible, the partnership between departments and between counties remains key. GIS professionals bring technical expertise, while departments like emergency management, public health and highways

Valerie Desio is an emergency management specialist for Eau Claire County and a certified emergency manager through both Wisconsin Emergency Management and the International Association of Emergency Managers. She promotes the use of GIS and technology to strengthen county operations and community resilience.





STRONGER TOGETHER

Ashland and Bayfield Counties Create Joint Dispatch Center

In Wisconsin's Northwoods, two neighboring counties have proven that collaboration can make communities safer, stronger and more efficient. Ashland and Bayfield counties have worked together on shared public safety initiatives for decades. In December 2024, their partnership reached a major milestone with the launch of Wisconsin's first multi-county consolidated dispatch center.

The Ashland-Bayfield County Emergency Communications Center now serves more than 32,000 residents across 2,500 square miles. The center represents years of planning, cooperation and commitment between the two counties, and has already delivered improvements in dispatch service and staffing.

► A history of collaboration

Ashland and Bayfield counties laid the initial groundwork for the joint dispatch effort in 2003 when they partnered to purchase a shared records management system for their sheriff's offices. The success of that early collaboration, including dispatch, jail and patrol operations, set the stage for sustained future cooperation.

By 2021, both counties were facing staffing shortages and increasing 911 call volumes, due in part to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which placed unprecedented stress on emergency service providers nationwide. Additionally, bad weather, vacations and illness often left dispatch centers short-staffed, jeopardizing their ability to meet minimum staffing levels.

"The challenges we were facing weren't unique," said Bayfield County emergency management coordinator Meagan Quaderer in a 2022 Wisconsin Public Radio interview. "But by looking at the problem together, we realized we could build something stronger: a system that ensures both counties always have the coverage they need."

Prior to the merger, both counties struggled to maintain minimum staffing. Bayfield County's dispatch center operated on a \$450,000 annual budget with six full-time and two part-time employees, said Bayfield County Chief Deputy Andy Runice, who led the dispatch office at the direction of the sheriff prior to the consolidation. According to Ashland County Administrator Dan Grady, Ashland County's dispatch center was budgeted just under \$675,000 for five full-time and four part-time employees.

Recognizing the shared benefits of consolidation, Bayfield and Ashland leaders began exploring a joint dispatch model

that would enhance reliability and efficiency.

The counties hired Mission Critical Partners, a national consulting

"By looking at the problem together, we realized we could build something stronger: a system that ensures both counties always have the coverage they need."

— Meagan Quaderer, Bayfield County Emergency Management Coordinator

firm specializing in 911 system improvements, to evaluate the staffing models, technology needs and governance structures for a consolidated dispatch center.

The following year, both county boards unanimously passed resolutions supporting a dispatch improvement plan and submitted a joint grant application to the Wisconsin Department of Military Affairs. With the funding secured, the counties created an independent governing board to



oversee operations, ensure equal representation and share decision-making authority.

► **Teamwork in action**

The success of the Ashland-Bayfield partnership hinged on collaboration at every level. Bayfield County's outgoing Sheriff Paul Susienk and current Sheriff Tony Williams, and Ashland County Sheriff Brian Zupke all played key roles in guiding the effort.

"This has been a true team effort," said County Administrator Grady. "Everyone recognized that this wasn't about giving something up. It was about gaining the ability to serve our communities better."

At the end of 2024, dispatch renovations were complete, new equipment was installed, and Ashland County's dispatch employees had officially transitioned to become Bayfield County employees. That allowed Ashland County's existing dispatch space to be repurposed as a backup location, a decision that strengthened staffing levels while maintaining continuity for callers.

The measurable results of the consolidation are significant. The new center exceeds all minimum staffing requirements for emergency medical dispatch, ensuring that every emergency call is answered by personnel who are certified in emergency medical dispatch. The center has enabled Bayfield's mass notification system to expand into Ashland County. In addition, a new field services advisory committee comprises all emergency service disciplines in both counties and reports directly to the Bayfield County Public Safety Answering Point (PSAP) Board.

Under the state consolidation grant, the new joint center is required to have at least two dispatchers on staff 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and to provide trained emergency medical dispatch services in which dispatchers

stay on the line with callers to provide life-saving medical instructions, such as CPR, until first responders arrive. The new system elevates the emergency medical dispatch services to a consistent, certified standard.

► **Award-winning model for the future**

Financially, both counties report that ongoing expenditures are comparable to pre-consolidation levels, proving the initiative's sustainability. The counties' collaborative work in creating a joint dispatch center received a 2025 Salute to Local Government Award from the Wisconsin Policy Forum in November.

"The cost savings weren't necessarily the goal," Sheriff Williams explained. "The real success is that our residents are getting better, faster, more reliable service — and our dispatchers have the support they need to do their jobs safely and effectively."

"By combining both places, we double the employees, so people can take off and spend time with their family and friends," Sheriff Zupke added.

The inter-county partnership improves public safety and service delivery without increasing costs. County leaders also expect that increased funding will help attract and retain dispatchers at a time when rural counties are stretched thin and competing for resources.

"We have come a long way, still, this is a new venture, and new challenges arise regularly," said Bayfield County Administrator Mark Abeles-Allison. "We hope we have paved the way for other communities to consider an option such as this for dispatch."

Blending practicality with a shared sense of purpose, the Ashland-Bayfield County Joint Dispatch Center stands as a model of intergovernmental cooperation. ■



AI Answers the Call

La Crosse County Eases Workload for Dispatch Staff

By Jane Klekamp, County Administrator, La Crosse County

In 2024, telecommunicators at La Crosse County's Public Safety Communications Center, which handles calls for all municipalities in the county, managed over 100,000 non-emergency calls while balancing longstanding challenges with staff recruitment and retention.

We decided it was time to explore new solutions. One idea that initially raised a few eyebrows was to use an artificial intelligence platform (essentially, a bot) to handle non-emergency calls, aiming to reduce the burden on staff and allow them to focus on 911 emergencies.

The county budgeted \$80,000 in 2025 for the platform, which includes implementation by the vendor Aurelian, a company that specializes in emergency dispatch solutions for local governments. Pricing is partly based on call volume.

Anyone who has interacted with customer service bots may understand the initial skepticism. But this AI system is different. Early this year, it began "training" by listening to recordings of non-emergency calls. We tested different voices, fine-tuned pronunciations of local places like Onalaska, Barre Mills and Bangor, and in May, we pressed the "go live" button.

Callers can always request to speak with a person, and

certain trigger words automatically route the call to a dispatcher, even if it started as a non-emergency call.

Since going live, the AI has handled over 30,000 calls, with 64% managed without a phone ringing in the dispatch center. Most involve the AI collecting information and displaying it on a dashboard for telecommunicators to create service entries in CAD (computer-aided dispatch). The system also handles

administrative requests, such as report inquiries, parking questions and jail information, by forwarding calls to the correct department or sending links via text. Some callers may not even realize they're interacting with AI.

Feedback has been positive. Callers whose issues are resolved with a case number receive an invitation to provide feedback. Of the 171 callers who rated the service, 121 gave it a "3" or higher, and 85 rated it a perfect "5."

Most importantly, the AI has eased staff workloads and allowed them to focus on what they do best — managing 911 emergencies. No jobs have been lost through its adoption, and we believe morale has improved, which supports retention.

As a county, we are now cautiously exploring ways to use AI as a force multiplier in other departments. ■



**Since going live,
the AI has handled over
30,000 calls, with 64% managed
without a phone ringing
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The Home Construction Cooperative student crew from Monroe and Brodhead high schools gains valuable carpentry skills and more while building a new home in Monroe.

Photos by the Home Construction Cooperative

Building Momentum

Green County Tackles Its Housing Shortage

By Tracy Brewer, Marketing Manager, and Olivia Otte, Executive Director, Green County Development Corporation

For years, community members in Green County have been asking a difficult question: As our community ages, how can we continue to support our businesses and schools if there aren't enough homes to bring new people to the area? Today, thanks to creative partnerships, bold leadership and collaborative planning, the answer is beginning to take shape in new developments throughout the county.

What started as a series of conversations has grown into a coordinated movement to address housing needs for a county of 37,000 people across 585 square miles. With a new \$2.8 million Housing Development Fund in place, more than \$1.4 million already committed to projects, and 180 new homes expected within the next two years, Green County is proving that a rural region can lead the way in innovative housing solutions.

► Conversations create momentum

The journey to make this happen began with a housing

summit several years ago. The Green County Development Corporation and Green County Healthy Community Coalition brought together residents, employers, government leaders, developers, and nonprofit organizations to tackle the challenge of addressing the community's need for quality, affordable housing.

Panel discussions and open conversations led to case study presentations on alternative options, such as accessory dwelling units and cooperative-living communities. Discussions also identified a need to increase skilled trades programs to support future growth and creative partnerships to build momentum. The overarching theme turned from fresh thinking and education to action backed by data.

► Data provides a roadmap

With momentum gaining, it was agreed to engage the Southwest Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission in conducting a countywide housing study that provided





Subdivision projects in Monroe and Brodhead are progressing rapidly with help from GCDC's Housing Development Fund, supported by contributions from local investors.

BY THE NUMBERS

hard data.

The sobering data indicated Green County would need more than 1,700 new homes by 2030 to support projected population and workforce growth. Without intervention, the shortage risked slowing business expansion, straining schools and services, and pushing young families and workers to neighboring counties.

The study not only quantified the challenge but also validated what residents and employers had been saying for years: the lack of housing was a barrier to growth, recruitment and long-term economic stability.

► Creative partnerships build momentum

While the housing study provided a roadmap, another initiative captured the community's imagination. In 2023, the Green County Development Corporation partnered with Monroe High School students, who became builders and renovators in a real-world learning experience.

SSM Health in Monroe donated a vacant home for students to renovate. Working alongside instructors and trades professionals, students gained hands-on skills in carpentry, plumbing and electrical work while also learning teamwork, project management and problem-solving. Once completed, the home was sold and the proceeds reinvested into the program.

That success sparked a new opportunity. The city of Monroe donated a vacant city lot, giving students the chance to start from the ground up and build a new home. Heading into its third year, the Home Construction Cooperative

1,700 homes
needed by 2030

\$2.8 MILLION total committed
to the Housing Development Fund

\$1.4 MILLION+ already
allocated to housing projects

180+ homes to be built
in the next two years

7+ major community partners
contributing to the fund

3 homes completed or in progress
and **52** students supported by the
Home Construction Cooperative program

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Program, now also including Brodhead High School students, proved that housing solutions could invest in youth and the workforce, address multiple community needs at once, and be a source of community pride.

► Turning collaboration into capital

These efforts laid the foundation for a bigger leap forward. With the housing study as evidence and community-driven projects like the student cooperative demonstrating creativity, the Green County Development Corporation began conversations with local industry and financial leaders about how to accelerate development.

Within six months, the Housing Development Fund was born, a \$2.8 million low-interest, gap-filling loan program designed to support housing developers. By bridging financial barriers that often delay or prevent projects, the fund makes it possible for developers to move forward with confidence.

This initiative would not have been possible without a matching funds commitment by the Colony Brands Foundation and by local partners, including Klondike Cheese, the Bank of New Glarus, Woodford State Bank, Lakeridge Bank, Green County Healthy Communities



Trusses are set on a new construction home in Monroe.

Coalition, and SSM Health, stepping up to pool resources.

“It takes businesses, nonprofits and local governments working side by side to move from planning to action,” said Olivia Otte, executive director of the Green County Development Corporation. “Housing is about more than roofs and walls. It’s about building the future of our communities.”

► Homes on the horizon

The impact of the Housing Development Fund is already visible. One year from conception, more than \$1.4 million has been committed to projects that have broken ground and will bring over 180 homes to Green County in the next two years. These include a mix of single-family

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“It takes businesses, nonprofits and local governments *working side by side* to move from planning to action.” — Olivia Otte, Green County Development Corporation

houses and multi-unit developments, addressing the needs of first-time buyers, families and renters. With a projected \$1 million increase in the tax base, job creation from the projects and income into the community, the entire county benefits.

At the same time, local municipalities are reviewing zoning changes to be more builder-friendly around housing growth. These policy shifts, combined with financial tools and community partnerships, create an ecosystem where growth can flourish.

John Baumann, president of the Colony Brands Foundation, emphasized the importance of this moment. “Strong communities take a long-term view in addressing the needs of their people. Housing is essential for keeping families, businesses and schools strong. The Housing Development Fund is one more way we’re investing in the future of Green County.”

► From vision to reality

Green County has gone from talking about housing shortages to implementing real solutions. By building awareness through community conversations, using data to drive decisions and implementing creative solutions, millions of dollars are flowing into a fund that will build homes, attract workers and strengthen the local economy. Green County has proven that rural communities can lead with innovation by bringing together different generations, industries and ideas to solve their greatest challenges.

For Green County, housing isn’t just about construction. It’s about creating places where people can put down roots, where students can learn skills, where businesses can grow, and where the future feels secure.

And thanks to the community’s efforts, that future is already under construction. ■

Tracy Brewer is the marketing manager and Olivia Otte is the executive director for the Green County Development Corporation.

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The 59th annual Governor's Fishing Opener in May gave (from left) DNR fisheries biologist Kyle Broadway, DNR Secretary Hyun, and DNR Fisheries Bureau Director Justine Hasz a chance to hold a musky, Wisconsin's state fish.

Photos by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

THE LEADERSHIP OF DNR SECRETARY KAREN HYUN

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Secretary Karen Hyun has spent her life surrounded by nature. From the green parks of her Pennsylvania childhood to the rugged trails of the Rockies, the outdoors has served as both her classroom and her inspiration. Now, as leader of one of Wisconsin's most expansive agencies, she's committed to safeguarding the state's natural treasures and helping every resident see how much the DNR influences their daily lives.

"I grew up in Chester County, Pennsylvania, and have always loved the outdoors," Hyun said. "I feel really lucky to have grown up with parents who liked being outside, walking, hiking and picnicking in the parks."

Those early experiences ignited a lifelong passion. Spending a few summers with the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry during high school deepened her interest in nature and science. "I loved it so much that I

decided to focus on science in college," she said.

Her parents also encouraged her to attend backpacking camps in Colorado and North Carolina, which became pivotal experiences. "Those trips were really formative for me," she recalled. "Just being outside and learning how to be safe and smart in the outdoors really cemented my love and respect for the natural world."

Hyun pursued her passion academically, earning both her bachelor's and master's degrees from Stanford University, followed by a Ph.D. from the University of Rhode Island in earth systems, a field that combines environmental science and policy. She began her career in Washington, D.C., as



Karen Hyun

a fellow on the U.S. House of Representatives Natural Resources Committee, which set her on a path of public service that eventually led to Wisconsin.

When asked what drew her to government work, Hyun was clear: “The environment is a public good in my mind, and governments should operate as stewards of it for the benefit of the current and future generations.”

That philosophy drives her leadership at the DNR, an agency she describes as both broad in mission and deeply personal in impact. “The DNR’s priorities are to ensure clean air, clean water and outdoor recreation opportunities for everyone who lives, works and plays in Wisconsin,” she said. “It’s a really big, broad mission, which I think can be a challenge. But it also presents us with the opportunity to establish close partnerships with local municipalities, other government agencies, numerous organizations and the public to fulfill that mission together.”

While many Wisconsinites associate the DNR with hunting, fishing and state parks, Hyun wants residents to realize the agency’s reach goes much further. “Our work oversees water quality, drinking water, air quality reporting, spills clean-up, forestry, recreational vehicle safety, endangered resources management, invasive species management, permitting and more. Work that is a part of our everyday lives,” she said. “It’s important for Wisconsinites to know that.”

Since stepping into the role, Hyun has been traveling across



Secretary Hyun joined Christina Kizewski, a DNR central elk herd biologist, and her team in June to collar elk calves in the Black River Forest.

the state and discovering new layers of Wisconsin’s natural beauty. “Before I stepped into this role, I thought I loved Wisconsin,” she said with a smile. “But now that I’ve been in this position for almost a year, I’m surprised to learn how deeply I love this state.”

Continued on page 26

An advertisement for SEH (Sehinc Engineering & Architects). The background is a stylized illustration of a city skyline with a person on a bicycle in the foreground. A QR code is located on the left side. Text overlays include: "where innovation meets impact. explore what's possible." and "engineers | architects | planners | scientists better places. clean water. infrastructure renewal. mobility." A contact banner at the top right says "contact us at sehinc.com or 800.325.2055". The SEH logo is in the bottom right corner.

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“The environment is a public good in my mind, and governments should operate as stewards of it for the benefit of the current and future generations.” — Karen Hyun

Continued from page 25

Her travels have taken her from the Black River Forest, where she helped collar elk calves, to the Horicon Marsh Wildlife Area, where she watched migrating birds. “Wisconsin is really beautiful, year-round,” she said. “I feel lucky to get to raise my kids here with my husband and then come to work and put my all into protecting our natural resources.”

That sense of gratitude and stewardship also influences how Hyun leads her team. “My leadership style puts a lot of trust in my subject matter experts,” she explained. “It’s important to recognize that you don’t have all the answers, and the people around you are there to help. It’s not a sign of



(From left) DNR Southeast Region Secretary's Director Mike Thompson and Secretary Hyun took a stroll around the DNR's building at the Wisconsin State Fair in August with Smokey Bear.

weakness to ask for that help.”

As she looks toward the future, Hyun hopes her legacy will be one of respect, both for her staff and for the state’s extraordinary natural heritage. “I want our DNR staff to know me as someone who deeply respected and appreciated them at and outside of work,” she said. “And I want the public to share in the pride I have of the

world-class natural resources in our state.”

For Hyun, protecting Wisconsin’s environment isn’t just a job. It’s a calling rooted in her earliest memories and renewed every time she steps into the field. “We’re all stewards,” she said. “And it’s a privilege to help lead that work in a place as special as Wisconsin.” ■

A large group of people, the Venture Architects team, are posed in an office setting. They are standing in front of a wall with a repeating geometric pattern. The team consists of men and women of various ages, all smiling. In the bottom right corner, there is a red hexagonal logo with the word 'VENTURE' in large white letters. Above it, in smaller text, is 'mke ESTABLISHED 1984 wis'. Below 'VENTURE' is the tagline 'THOUGHTFUL DESIGN FOR SPACES THAT SERVE'.

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The Value of Service

Leading Wisconsin Through Regulatory Boards

By Jennifer Garrett, Deputy Secretary, Department of Safety and Professional Services

County officials understand better than most what it means to be in public service. You've dedicated your time and energy to strengthening local communities, improving public systems, and ensuring government works for the people it represents. But there are also opportunities to extend that commitment beyond county lines — to help shape the policies and professional standards that guide Wisconsin as a whole.

One meaningful way to do that is by serving on a state regulatory or advisory board. The Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services, which is responsible for occupational licensing and construction regulation, oversees a number of boards that offer experienced public servants, industry experts and community-minded residents alike the chance to influence specific issues, professions and policy areas in tangible, practical ways.

"The opportunities for service at DPS are vast and varied," said DPS Secretary Dan Hereth. "We have code councils that update building standards, advisory committees that assist with rulemaking, and examining boards that regulate entire professions. There are seats for both public and professional members, and we need engaged, committed individuals to carry out this important work."

There are boards for nearly every regulated profession, from physicians and pharmacists to engineers, accountants

and land surveyors. In fact, more than 60 boards, councils and committees fall under the DPS umbrella, each with professional members from the specific field and members of the general public.

► Where policy meets practice

Every regulatory board operates in a dynamic environment where laws evolve, industries innovate and public expectations shift. Wisconsin's boards often stand at the crossroads of these forces, balancing long-held standards with industry progress and change.

These boards are active policy participants, drafting administrative rules, interpreting statutes and helping ensure that innovations like telehealth, AI-assisted diagnostics and sustainable engineering align with Wisconsin's regulatory framework.

Serving on a board is not a ceremonial role, it's a leadership role. It's a chance to shape policy that protects the public, supports professionals and strengthens Wisconsin's reputation for fairness and excellence.

► How boards work

Each board, council or committee is unique. Most are created by state statute while the DPS secretary establishes others. Membership can range from three to more than 13 seats, with terms typically lasting three years. Terms are

“There are seats for both public and professional members, and we need engaged, committed individuals to carry out this important work.” - DSPS Secretary Dan Hereth



staggered to ensure continuity and institutional memory.

Meeting schedules vary, too. Some groups meet monthly and others only as needed, but all share a common purpose — to protect the public and uphold professional standards.

Examining boards (such as the Medical Examining Board, the Board of Nursing and the Funeral Directors Examining Board) are independent regulators, meaning they have direct authority to issue licenses, enforce standards and make policy decisions.

Councils and committees, on the other hand, are primarily advisory. They offer technical expertise, recommend updates to building codes, rules and forms, and guide modernization efforts across professions. While they don't have disciplinary powers, their influence shapes how Wisconsin regulates everything from commercial buildings to sign language interpreting.

All boards, councils and committees are staffed by DSPS employees, who provide administrative services such as legal counsel, rule writing and credentialing support.

“This is all important work that protects the people of Wisconsin,” Hereth said. “Having a balance of professional and public members ensures that public protection remains the foundation of all we do.”

► **Why serve?**

Most board, council and committee members are volunteers, appointed either by the governor or the department secretary. With so many boards and so many seats, there are abundant opportunities for both professionals and members of the public to step up and contribute.

Professional members must hold an active license in good standing. Many join because they care deeply about their field and want to help strengthen it.

“I chose to serve on the Wisconsin Real Estate Appraisers Board to give back to the state I've called home my entire life,” said Dan Figurski, a board member. “My top priority is keeping Wisconsin at the forefront of the real estate appraisal profession — advocating for high

standards, supporting the success of our appraisers, and ensuring that consumers receive credible, fair valuations across the state.”

Megan Jackson, chair of the Cosmetology Examining Board, serves for similar reasons. “I am dedicated to upholding professional standards, promoting public safety and supporting the advancement of Wisconsin's beauty and barbering industry,” she said.

“With over 20 years in all aspects of the field, I bring a deep understanding of both the educational and entrepreneurial sides of the profession. I value my role to provide the opportunity to shape fair and modern policies that reflect the evolving landscape of salon/barber and spa services,” said Jackson. “I believe not only does licensure build trust, but it also connects education, professionalism, and consumer confidence. I'm proud to serve a community of professionals who are passionate about their craft and committed to excellence.”

Public members, meanwhile, represent the perspective of consumers and citizens. No professional experience is required, just curiosity, integrity and a commitment to fairness.

“There are no specific requirements for public members,” said Hereth. “These are opportunities for people who care about public protection, who are willing to dedicate time and energy, and who want to engage meaningfully in civic life. We want people who want to be here.”

► **A statewide call to service**

DSPS and the boards are committed to reflecting all of Wisconsin with varied geographic locations, practice types and experiences represented. The state benefits when board members bring different regional perspectives and professional experiences. Current board members come from all over the state and reflect various practice environments. Further, most meetings are virtual or hybrid to make it easier to participate regardless of where board members live.

Continued on page 30

► A structure built on trust

Public involvement is a defining feature of Wisconsin's regulatory system. Meetings are open. Agendas are published. Public members serve as equal voting partners alongside licensed professionals, ensuring decisions reflect both technical expertise and real-world impact.

The role of public members cannot be overstated. They bring the voice of the people to complex professional discussions, reminding boards that every rule and every standard ultimately affects lives and livelihoods. They embody a simple truth: government works best when citizens are part of it.

► Get involved

Right now, there are dozens of open seats across Wisconsin's boards, councils and committees. If you're looking for a way to serve your community, lend your

expertise or learn more about how professional regulation shapes everyday life, consider applying to serve.

You can explore current openings and board details at bit.ly/DSPS_Boards.



LEARN MORE

Explore current openings and board details at bit.ly/DSPS_Boards.

Each page includes rosters, vacancies and links to apply. Depending on the board, applications are submitted through the governor's office or directly through DSPS. If you'd like a presentation or additional information about board service opportunities, contact Deputy

Secretary Jennifer Garrett at jennifer.garrett@wisconsin.gov.

In Wisconsin, public service is something we can all take part in. Whether you're an expert in your field or simply passionate about good government, there's a seat at the table waiting for you. ■

Jennifer Garrett is the deputy secretary of the Department of Safety and Professional Services. Its mission "is to promote economic growth and stability while protecting the citizens of Wisconsin as designated by statute."



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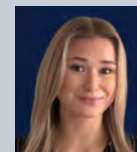
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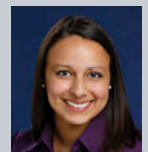
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Photos courtesy of Monroe Photography

A Northwoods Christmas

HOLIDAY MAGIC SPARKLES ACROSS NORTHWEST WISCONSIN

By Travel Northwest Wisconsin Tourism Committee

There's something undeniably special about Christmas in northwest Wisconsin. As the snowflakes start to fall and the pine boughs gather a soft white dusting, communities across the region light up — literally and figuratively — for the holiday season. From twinkling light displays to festive parades, sleigh rides and community gatherings, the Northwoods becomes a wonderland of warmth, nostalgia and holiday cheer.



► Washburn County: A Forest of Lights

For many, the holiday season isn't complete without a spectacular light display. In Washburn County, visitors can enjoy not just one but two magical lighting experiences.

At Bashaw Lake Resort, the woods come alive with more than 1,600 twinkling LED lights forming a glittering tunnel, synchronized musical light shows, animated displays and laser lights. Guests can walk a gentle half-mile trail through this winter wonderland, surrounded by color and holiday music.

Meanwhile, the Shell Lake Municipal Campground offers another cozy, family-friendly option with a community light display organized by the Shell Lake Lions. Whether driving or walking through, this glowing lakeside display is the perfect way to end a chilly December evening with loved ones.

► Sawyer County: Christmas in Hayward

Just a short drive away, the town of Hayward transforms into a postcard-perfect holiday destination. The Christmas in Hayward celebration begins the Saturday after Thanksgiving and carries on through the Saturday before Christmas, creating weeks of holiday magic. Families can sip hot chocolate by the fire, take a horse-drawn sleigh ride through town, and enjoy the festive glow of a lighted parade. Carolers fill the air with song, and downtown businesses welcome shoppers looking for unique holiday treasures.



► **Ashland County: Garland City of the North**

In Ashland, the Christmas season officially begins with Customer Appreciation Day. On Dec. 6, more than 30 downtown retailers will greet shoppers with festive treats and special holiday touches, including complimentary gift wrapping. Then, as twilight falls, the annual Garland City of the North Christmas Parade rolls down historic Main Street in a dazzling procession of lights, floats and holiday spirit. The celebration continues at Plaza Park, where the community gathers for the annual Christmas tree lighting, complete with caroling, hot chocolate, cookies, marshmallows and a warm holiday message from the mayor.

A little farther south, Butternut keeps the small-town Christmas spirit alive with Christmas in the Village. This Dec. 6 event brings local vendors, bakers, artisans and crafters together to celebrate the season. It's a perfect place to find handcrafted gifts and homemade holiday goodies.

► **Barron County: A Gingerbread Christmas in Rice Lake**

In Barron County, downtown Rice Lake sparkles during its annual Holiday Parade. This year, the theme is "Gingerbread Land." On Dec. 4, families can visit Santa at Kitchen & Floor Décor before the parade, stroll past beautifully decorated trees at city hall, and end the night with the joyful sounds of the Northwinds British Brass Band at Bethany Lutheran Church. It's an evening filled with tradition, music and community spirit.

► **Bayfield County: Christmas in Cable**

The first weekend in December brings Christmas in Cable, a beloved Northwoods tradition. Visitors can enjoy a

In Ashland, the Christmas season officially begins with Customer Appreciation Day. On Dec. 6, more than 30 downtown retailers will greet shoppers with festive treats and special holiday touches.

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community tree lighting, an arts and crafts show, cookie exchanges and the ever-popular Christmas Cash Raffle. The Shop Local Holiday Challenge encourages visitors and locals alike to support small businesses, making holiday shopping meaningful and fun.

► Iron County: Fun, Frost & Family in Hurley

In Hurley, the holidays are all about family fun. The Fun, Frost & Family celebration takes place at the Hurley K-12 School on Dec. 13, offering free holiday activities for kids and families. Guests can meet Mr. and Mrs. Claus, take part in the Reindeer Walk, adopt a reindeer,



craft ornaments, and write letters to Santa, all while enjoying sweet treats and festive music.

From glowing light tunnels and sleigh rides to parades and small-town markets, the communities of northwest Wisconsin know how to celebrate the holidays.

Whether you're visiting from afar or making new memories close to home, the spirit of the season shines bright across the Northwoods. Bundle up, grab a cup of cocoa and make this Christmas one to remember

in northwest Wisconsin. ■

The Travel Northwest Wisconsin Tourism Committee serves Ashland, Bayfield, Barron, Burnett, Chippewa, Douglas, Iron, Polk, Price, Rusk, Sawyer and Washburn counties.



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Are Property Taxes Becoming More Affordable?

It's December again, and the start of a new season: the property tax season. This is the month homeowners see how much their property taxes have increased when their bills arrive in the mail. As of press time, this year's property tax amounts are not yet known. However, a review of property taxes over the past 10 years provides some positive news, along with some warning signs.

► Property tax overview

Among all state and local taxes in Wisconsin, the property tax is the largest. In fiscal year 2025, the state income tax generated \$10.4 billion, and the sales tax (state and local combined) brought in \$8.5 billion. Property taxes totaled \$13.6 billion, far exceeding either tax.

Property taxes are often considered the most “visible” form of taxation because of how we pay them. Unlike income taxes, which are automatically withheld from our paychecks, or sales taxes, which are tacked onto everyday purchases in small, easily overlooked amounts, property taxes usually come due in large, lump-sum payments. This makes the tax highly visible, and because of its size, unpopular.

Yet, while visible, these taxes also have the most direct local impact. The money collected pays for local services such as police and fire departments, emergency medical services, public schools, libraries, parks, sidewalks, and transportation networks, among others. In other words, the property tax may be the most disliked tax, but it also funds many of the public services we rely on each day.

While property taxes seem high, the amount that can

be levied for each user of the tax is capped by state law. For most users, these caps can be exceeded by voter approval at a referendum. Some municipalities, counties, and technical colleges have gone to referendum, but K-12 school districts hold most property tax referenda. They also levy the most property taxes.

Last year, school districts levied \$6.1 billion (45% of all property taxes). Municipalities levied \$3.6 billion (27%), counties levied \$2.6 billion (18.8%), technical colleges levied \$516 million (3.8%), and other entities, including tax incremental finance (TIF) districts, levied the remaining \$839 million (6.2%).

► A decade of change

Not only do taxpayers generally dislike the property tax because it is so large, but they also believe it increases too much each year. However, a look at statewide data over the last decade shows that average annual growth has been quite moderate. Increases over the past two years, though, point to that changing in the next few years.

From 2014 to 2024, property tax levies statewide increased 31.3%, or an average of 2.8% per year. In five of those years, growth was less than 2.5%. To help make property taxes “more affordable,” the state provides a school levy credit to help offset some of the taxes. In 2014, that credit was \$747 million. By 2024, it had reached \$1.28 billion, a 71% increase. As a result, the tax paid by property owners rose just 2.5% per year over those 10 years. In five of the years, the increase after the credit was less than 2%.

The largest increase on property tax bills was in the



Personal income increased at an average rate of 4.7% per year over the period studied. That is nearly double the increase in net property taxes.

“other” category, where levy growth averaged 4.1% per year. Municipal levies averaged 3.3% growth, followed by K-12 schools (2.5%), technical colleges (2.4%), and counties (2.3%).

► Property tax versus other taxes

To put the 10-year property tax increase in context, we looked at how some other taxes changed during the same period. The rates for income taxes, Wisconsin’s second largest tax, were cut several times, along with many other changes. Even after these cuts, income tax collections increased an average of 3.6% annually, outpacing property tax growth. The third largest tax is the state’s general sales tax. Collections from that tax outpaced both the property and income tax, growing an average of 4.8% per year.

What this all means is that the property tax share of these three taxes has declined from 44.6% in 2015 to 40.7% in 2025.

► Property taxes vs. income

One of the major concerns about the property tax is the “ability to pay” for some taxpayers. In other words, does the tax require an atypical amount of the taxpayer’s income?

Here, we look at that concept at a macro level, comparing property tax increases with increases in two measures of income. The first is personal income, which is a broad measure of income in the state published by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. The second drills down to the household level. Median household income is the estimated income for the household that is right in the middle of the income distribution.

Personal income increased at an average rate of 4.7% per year over the period studied. That is nearly double the increase in net property taxes. Median household income averaged 4.1% growth over 10 years, again much higher

than property tax growth. Looked at another way, the total increase in personal income (58%) and median household income (49%) easily outpaced the overall increase in net property taxes (28%).

► Stats vs. personal experience

Many reading this may be saying to themselves, “My property taxes went up a lot more than what this article is showing.”

They may be right. The property tax has local variations that statewide numbers can mask. For example, during this same

period, net property taxes increased less than 1% on average in Forest, Oneida and Lincoln counties but more than 4% in Dane and St. Croix counties.

Within counties, property tax changes vary with municipality. Growing cities and villages typically have rising property tax collections. However, with

more taxpayers and higher property values, the effect on individual property taxpayers will be smaller than the overall increase. Also, communities that have approved referenda will likely have experienced higher increases.

► Recent changes

As mentioned at the outset, recent changes are sending some warning signs. Over the past two years, property tax levies increased 4.7% and 4.2%, respectively. These were by far the largest increases over the 10 years studied. That growth was not borne completely by property taxpayers, though. In those two years, the school levy credit was also increased, reducing net tax growth to 2.8% and 3.9%, respectively.

For tax bills mailed this year and next year, though, there will be no increase in the school levy credit to offset the growth in property taxes. That could be troubling if levy growth continues at the same pace as the last two years. ■

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PIERCE COUNTY

A Taste of Tuscany: Vino in the Valley

Perched high in the rolling hills of the Rush River Valley, just outside the quaint village of Maiden Rock in Pierce County, you will find Vino in the Valley, a hidden gem where the flavors of Italy meet the beauty of Wisconsin.

From the moment guests arrive, it's clear this is more than a restaurant or winery; it's an experience crafted with care, passion and a love for community.

"Vino in the Valley started out as a crazy idea one day when we were floating in the river," said owner Larry Brenner with a laugh. "What am I going to do with my land when I retire? I enjoy fine dining, and I enjoy people. Sometimes you must take a chance, but I never dreamed it would come this far. Now, on a Saturday night, we can feed 700 people."

These guests are greeted by the gentle sweep of vineyards and the warm smiles of longtime staff who make everyone feel like family. Outdoor tables line the bluffs, offering panoramic views that stretch across the valley, while cozy firelit spaces invite friends and strangers alike to linger over good conversation and great wine. With the crisp, clean air and lush countryside, visitors can almost imagine themselves in Tuscany as they stroll among the vines.

But it's not just the setting that makes Vino in the Valley



By Michelle Gormican Thompson, WCA Communications

special. Brenner makes sure guests enjoy every minute of their time. On each table are the words to "That's Amore." Working his way around the space, he brings along guests to sing the iconic song with him.

A sign on the wall aptly describes Vino in the Valley: "Come for the experience. Stay for dinner." On any given night, visitors might dance to live music, watch hot air balloons take to the sky, or enjoy the scenery on horseback. It is a recipe for something truly special.

The food tells a story rooted in authentic Italian recipes, paired with handcrafted wines from fruit grown right on the property. Brenner and his team continue to work tirelessly to ensure that each bite and sip is a celebration of sharing life's simple pleasures.

"Vino in the Valley stands out, not only for its breathtaking Pierce County setting but for the incredible people whose dedication brings it to life," said Mark C. Rose, president & CEO of Discover Mediaworks, Inc. "Their story is one of passion, community and the kind of hospitality that makes Wisconsin feel like home." □

► **WATCH NOW:** bit.ly/Vino_Valley



MARATHON COUNTY

Wisconsin's Ancient Geological Treasure: Dells of the Eau Claire

Known as the crown jewel of the Marathon County Park System, the Dells of the Eau Claire tells a story, literally, billions of years old. With striking volcano rock formations, scenic trails and the Eau Claire River's cascading falls, the landmark draws people to the region to celebrate this natural wonder.

"Most people don't stop and look at what the rocks really consist of, and they are beautiful," said Russ Wilson, president of the Marathon County Historical Society. "At the Dells, you can see three rock exposures in contact with one another, and that is incredibly unusual anywhere west of the Rocky Mountains."

According to Wilson, the ancient bedrock formations at the Dells of the Eau Claire include numerous rock types, with some as old as 2.8 billion years.

The Dells of the Eau Claire connects to the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, one of only 11 national scenic trails in the United States. Stretching over 1,200 miles across

Wisconsin, the Ice Age Trail follows the edge of the last continental glacier, known as the Wisconsin Glaciation, highlighting landscapes shaped 10,000 to 12,000 years ago as the ice advanced, retreated and melted.

This connection to the Ice Age Trail at the Dells of the Eau Claire offers visitors both scenic and geological education. Hikers can explore the river's rock formations, enjoy the forested trails, and then continue along paths that tell the story of Wisconsin's glacial past. It's a rare spot, where dramatic natural beauty meets deep geological history, allowing people to literally walk through time.

"We are all from planet Earth, and in my opinion, the history of geology and biology is one and the same," said Wilson. "It's very important to understand Earth's history, and you can get this lesson beyond the picnics and hiking and biking. It's the crown jewel for very good reasons." □

► **WATCH NOW:** bit.ly/Dells_EauClaire

To see season four stories as they are released, as well as previous seasons, visit Discover Wisconsin's YouTube page at youtube.com/DiscoverWI and scroll down to the "Uniquely Wisconsin" section. You can also listen to "The Cabin" podcast, which features counties in the program, on your favorite podcast player.

To learn more and join the Emmy Award-winning Uniquely Wisconsin brand, contact WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell or WCA Communications Consultant Michelle Gormican Thompson at 866-404-2700.



Innovation Grant Funds Focus of December “In the Board Room” Webinar

Join us for this year’s final installment of “In the Board Room with Attolles Law,” on Wednesday, Dec. 17 at 12 noon, to discuss Innovation Grant funds.

The team will discuss Act 12’s Innovation Fund and all of the details surrounding the grant program. Counties will get an overview of the legal requirements associated with Innovation Grants and hear from other experts versed

in how the program operates.

To attend the final 2025 live webinar, register at bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom25. To register for the 2026 webinars, visit bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom26. There is no cost to register.

Recordings of all webinars are available on the WCA website at wicounties.org. ■

► SAVE THE DATES FOR 2026 WEBINARS

January 28 | February 25 | March 25 | April 22 | May 27 | June 24 | July 22
August 26 | October 28 | November 18 | December 16

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.



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

2025 Graduates Recognized; Registration Open for 2026

Eighteen individuals were recognized this fall for their completion of the Wisconsin Local Government Leadership Academy, a collaborative effort between the UW-Madison Division of Extension, the Wisconsin Counties Association, and Leadership Wisconsin, Inc. This is the sixth class to graduate.

During the nine-month program, participants focus on four primary skills that contribute to an effective local government leader: relationship-building, communication, decision-making, and vision. Each skill is grounded in the idea that we lead in service of the community and can accomplish more when we work together.

The Local Government Leadership Academy serves:

- Elected officials who understand the basics of their role and are ready to take on new leadership challenges
- Department heads, directors and managers who are new to leadership roles, as well as those aspiring to or preparing for leadership roles
- Anyone interested in becoming a more effective leader in local government

Registration for the 2026 academy is open until Jan. 7, 2026.

Learn more at go.wisc.edu/l gla, or contact Elizabeth McCrank, Local Government Leadership Academy lead facilitator, UW-Madison Division of Extension at 715-436-0704 or lgla@extension.wisc.edu.

2025 LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEADERSHIP ACADEMY GRADUATES

- **Kendell Cooper**, Public Health Program Manager, Jefferson County
- **Dr. Cristina Figueroa Soto**, Medical Examiner's Office Director of Operations, Dane County
- **Dr. Monique Hassman**, GIS/Land Information Officer, Vernon County
- **Colin Iwanski**, Facilities Maintenance Technician, Portage County
- **Sarah Lakewood**, Register in Probate, Portage County
- **Aerial Lopez**, Assistant to the County Board Chair, Milwaukee County
- **Allison Haase**, County Board Supervisor, Waushara County
- **Lucas Meddaugh**, County Engineer, Portage County
- **Laura Myers**, Deputy Clerk-Treasurer, Village of Lake Delton
- **Mollie Olson**, Public Health Strategist, Jackson County
- **Sara Raikowski**, Risk Management Specialist, Portage County
- **Ben Rodenberg**, Environmental Health Specialist, Jackson County
- **Rebecca Rohan**, Register in Probate, St. Croix County
- **Natasha Schmid**, Human Resources Director, Douglas County
- **David Sletten**, County Administrator, Douglas County
- **Leah Walrack**, Public Health Nurse, Iowa County
- **Pamela Williams**, Assessor's Office Division Manager, Milwaukee County
- **John Young**, City Administrator, City of Baraboo ■

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County Leaders Push Transportation Priorities in Washington, D.C.

By National Association of Counties Staff

In October, county leaders convened in Washington, D.C., for a transportation-focused fly-in hosted by the National Association of Counties. In meetings on Capitol Hill, visiting leaders emphasized key priorities for counties in the next surface transportation reauthorization bill.

Attendees championed priorities aimed at addressing five major areas:

- Increasing access to federal formula funds to better align with the volume of infrastructure owned and maintained by counties. Local governments, including but not limited to counties, receive 14% of federal formula funds, despite counties owning more than a quarter of federal-aid highway miles and almost half of poor-condition bridges. Expanding programs like the Surface Transportation Block Grant program while requiring suballocation of programs like the Bridge Formula Program would empower counties and other local governments to use important federal formula dollars for critical projects in their communities.
- Preserving and improving discretionary grant opportunities to ensure that these opportunities remain



available for counties to undertake essential, county-led infrastructure projects while also reducing those programs' administrative burdens and barriers to entry.

- Improving planning and the project selection process to ensure that federal formula dollars intended for local control are actually used for locally led, locally selected projects.
- Funding rural planning by providing federal funding for Regional (or Rural) Transportation Planning Organizations. Currently, only areas with populations over 50,000 receive federal funding for planning organizations, widening disparities between urban and rural communities.
- Reforming the environmental review process by eliminating overly burdensome elements of the federal permitting system that drive up costs and limit the impact of federal funding. County projects with low costs or within existing rights-of-way, in particular, should not be subject to the same level of permitting scrutiny as new starts.

"Counties own 44% of public road miles and 38% of bridges nationwide," said NACo Executive Director Matthew Chase. "We are important stakeholders in our nation's

Wisconsin county officials carried a similar message to our congressional representatives earlier in the year.

Last spring, representatives from the Wisconsin Counties Association, the Wisconsin County Highway Association, and nine counties traveled to Washington, D.C., for a transportation fly-in hosted by the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin. Their advocacy closely aligned with NACo's priorities — calling for greater local access to federal funding, continued investment in county-led infrastructure, and relief from regulatory hurdles that slow project delivery.

The WCA delegation's message to Wisconsin's congressional



members was threefold. Members thanked federal partners for their ongoing bipartisan support of transportation funding; shared real-world examples of how federal dollars have strengthened local infrastructure; and encouraged lawmakers to focus on a handful of key areas in the next transportation bill — four of which mirrored the priorities raised in NACo's October meetings.

Together, both efforts reflect a unified voice among counties nationwide: a call for sustainable, direct federal investment in transportation systems that counties build, maintain and depend on every day.

transportation system, and keenly aware of the need to invest in locally owned infrastructure. The priorities laid out for the surface transportation reauthorization are rooted in that desire to see transportation infrastructure that's safe and robust enough to meet the needs of our residents and support economic growth in our counties."

Since the start of this year, NACo has been vocal in sharing its priorities with partners on Capitol Hill and in the administration. This includes submitting letters outlining policy priorities for the next surface transportation reauthorization bill to the U.S. Department of Transportation and the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. By following up on these asks, fly-in participants reinforced

the importance of these priorities and highlighted their potential impact in counties of all sizes.

"Every year, county governments invest more than \$146 billion of our own funds into infrastructure and an additional \$60 billion into transportation. Restrictions on local fiscal authority limit our ability to spend further, and yet our infrastructure lags behind," said Chase. "Counties are asking for increased, direct federal investment to support the bipartisan goal of having a world-class transportation system."

For more information about NACo's broader advocacy in transportation and infrastructure, visit naco.org/topics/transportation-infrastructure. ■

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN At the time of this writing, the federal government shutdown that began Oct. 1 is still ongoing. Many federal programs counties administer or rely on, including nutrition, health, and emergency response programs, have been affected. Once the shutdown ends, counties may continue experiencing challenges due to the delay in funding. Members are encouraged to contact the WCA Government Affairs team with information and stories about any ongoing challenges. For a nationwide overview of the shutdown's effect on counties, visit naco.org/resource/federal-government-shutdown-resource-hub.



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LEGAL ISSUES
RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Trends in County Regulation of Large-Scale Solar Energy Systems

By Andy Phillips and Rebecca Roeker, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.

The acceleration of the reduction in tax credits for solar development and the change in federal policy for solar projects have not resulted in a slowdown of solar projects in Wisconsin. On the contrary, Wisconsin continues to see both small-scale and large-scale solar projects moving forward at a rapid pace.

As counties continue to experience the tension between renewable energy systems as a positive step in improving our carbon footprint and the impacts of solar development on the surrounding community, county officials are voicing concerns regarding the statutory restraints placed on their ability to exercise local control. In addition, the demand for electronic data and artificial intelligence technology has resulted in several new data center developments throughout Wisconsin, and counties often face questions relating to data center energy demands.

This article summarizes the restrictions counties face in regulating solar energy systems, and new trends in strategies that counties are using to ensure their voices are heard when a new solar project is proposed in the county.

► Restrictions on counties' regulation of solar energy systems

The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin has jurisdiction to regulate renewable energy systems that are designed for operation at a capacity of 100 megawatts or more¹ and defined as a "large electric generating facility."² Even if a county has adopted an ordinance regulating the construction or operation of a large electric generating facility, once the PSC issues a certificate of public

convenience and necessity (CPCN) for the facility, "the installation and utilization of the facility may nevertheless proceed."³ The PSC's grant of the CPCN signals that the project is moving forward, and by this point, a county may have lost its opportunity to voice concerns.

The Wisconsin Legislature has adopted a statewide policy favoring renewable energy systems.⁴ Wisconsin courts have recognized this policy stating that "the Wisconsin Statutes... say that our legislature favors alternative energy systems," and therefore "disfavor[s] wholesale local control which circumvents this policy."⁵ This policy is set forth in Wisconsin Statutes §§ 1.12(3)(b)⁶ and 66.0401. Wis. Stat. § 66.0401(1m) also prohibits a county from placing "any restriction, either directly or in effect, on the installation or use of a solar energy system," unless the restriction satisfies one of the following conditions:

- (a) Serves to preserve or protect the public health or safety
- (b) Does not significantly increase the cost of the system or significantly decrease its efficiency
- (c) Allows for an alternative system of comparable cost and efficiency⁷

These conditions act as limitations on a county's authority to regulate solar energy systems. The conditions should not be interpreted as statutory permission for broad regulations through the use of a county's police power.⁸ In *Ecker Bros. v. Calumet County*, the court interpreted these conditions as "the standards circumscribing the power of [counties], not openings for them to make policy that is contrary to the state's expressed policy."⁹ Unless a county determines, on a case-by-case basis, that one of these conditions is present, the proposed solar energy system

As the number of solar developments continues to grow and the scope of the facilities continues to expand, counties are looking to alternative measures and strategies to address the significant impacts of large-scale solar operations.

may not be restricted by any county ordinance or other restriction unless that restriction is explicitly permitted in the statutes.¹⁰ The Ecker Bros. decision results in significant limitations on a county's ability to regulate solar energy systems using the authority in Wis. Stat. § 66.0401(1m). These limitations apply to both zoning ordinances and other general ordinances, and apply regardless of the facility's generating capacity.

► Trends in county actions to regulate large-scale solar energy systems

The Wisconsin Legislature's policy favoring renewable energy systems has not reduced the number of concerns counties face given the limitations on counties' ability to regulate solar facilities. As the number of solar developments continues to grow and the scope of the facilities continues to expand, counties are looking to alternative measures and strategies to address the significant impacts of large-scale solar operations. Two common ones are an increased negotiation on joint development agreements and involvement in PSC proceedings.

A joint development agreement (JDA) between a county and a solar facility developer has traditionally been the best mechanism for a county to participate in offsetting the impacts of a large-scale solar project. A JDA may address important mitigation efforts such as setbacks, vegetation management, fencing, road usage, and compensation for costs incurred by a county as a result of the solar project.

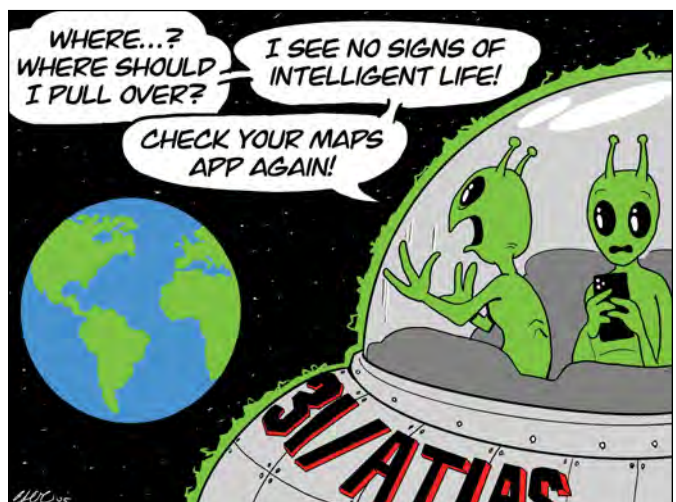
Due to the trend of larger solar developments and larger BESS (battery energy storage system) facilities, the impacts of solar developments also increase. Counties are addressing these growing impacts by taking a more aggressive approach in negotiating a JDA. For example, the increase in BESS facilities has raised heightened concerns about emergency management and increased costs due to the unique nature of the BESS technology.¹¹ Counties are investing a greater

amount of time in understanding the potential risks of these facilities and crafting emergency response plans that adequately address those risks in greater detail. In addition, counties are taking a more aggressive approach in seeking compensation for the costs accompanying the increased demand in emergency response obligations.

Counties are also utilizing other negotiation strategies to secure the best JDA possible. By looking at the specific circumstances of a project, a county may craft a more effective negotiation strategy. Considerations such as timing, public need, historical considerations, and extent of impacts may be used to focus a negotiation on particular issues that are important to a county.

With the PSC's jurisdiction over large-scale solar facilities and the restrictions on county regulations, counties have chosen to be more involved in a project's PSC proceedings than in past years. The general goal of taking a more active role is to ensure the PSC adheres to its statutory obligations when approving a large solar facility's CPCN and to ensure the CPCN application

Continued on page 46





LEGAL ISSUES

Continued from page 45

does not include proposals that may cause harm to the county. In particular, counties have a key interest in PSC's determination of whether the facility will "unreasonably interfere with the orderly land use and development plans for the area."¹² This statutory element also includes the PSC's analysis of a facility's impacts on farmland, which is often a vital concern for Wisconsin counties. Greater attention to the PSC proceeding may also result in a more successful negotiation of a JDA due to representations a developer may include in the application.

A county has several options to become involved in a PSC proceeding. The involvement may be more passive in nature, such as monitoring the docket for new information, or the county may take a more active role.

Counties may choose to participate as a member of the "public" by submitting public comments and appearing at the public hearing. The PSC website includes several helpful tips on public involvement in the process. We encourage counties to visit the PSC website for a guide to submitting public comments and participating in the public hearing.¹³

Counties may also choose an even more active role by intervening in the PSC proceeding.¹⁴ Intervening allows a county to engage as a party in the CPCN application review proceeding. Intervention ensures a county's input is included in the PSC record and considered by the PSC. For example, as an intervenor, a county may present evidence and testimony, counter evidence and testimony presented by the applicant or other intervening parties, challenge or support information presented by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in the environmental review process, and submit recommendations on conditions of the PSC's approval. PSC proceedings are complex, and we encourage counties to work closely with their corporation counsel to successfully navigate the intervention and PSC review process.

► Conclusion

While Wis. Stat. § 66.0401 limits a county's authority to regulate solar energy systems, counties are able to restrict

solar energy systems in the narrow circumstances carved out in the Wisconsin Statutes. In addition, counties may take steps to ensure the impacts created by a solar facility are mitigated to the greatest extent possible through assertive negotiation of a JDA. It is important that counties make their voices heard, and a county may choose to ensure a "seat at the table" in application review by partaking in the PSC process.

Given the complexity of the legal issues and procedures involved in solar regulation, counties should work closely with corporation counsel when determining how to best regulate solar energy facilities and protect the county's interests when a solar facility is proposed. If you have any questions surrounding the complex topic of a county's ability to regulate solar energy systems, please do not hesitate to contact the association or the authors at aphillips@attolles.com or rroeker@attolles.com. ■

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

1. Wis. Stat. § 196.491(3)(a)1.; Wis. Stat. § 196.491(1)(e), (g).
2. Wis. Stat. § 196.491(1)(g).
3. Wis. Stat. § 196.491(3)(i).
4. *Ecker Bros. v. Calumet County*, 2009 WI App 112, ¶¶ 1, 19, 21-22, 321 Wis.2d 51, citing *Numrich v. City of Mequon Board of Zoning Appeals*, 2001 WI App 88, ¶ 17, 242 Wis.2d 677.
5. *Ecker Bros.*, 321 Wis.2d at ¶ 19.
6. Wis. Stat. § 1.12(3)(b) states "it is the goal of the state that, to the extent that it is cost-effective and technically feasible, all new installed capacity for electric generation in the state be based on renewable energy resources, including hydroelectric, wood, wind, solar, refuse, agricultural and biomass energy resources."
7. Wis. Stat. § 66.0401(1m).
8. See *Ecker Bros.*, 321 Wis.2d at ¶ 21.
9. *Id.*
10. *Id.* at ¶ 10.
11. A BESS is comprised of batteries, inverters, transformers and auxiliary systems. Concerns with BESS facilities, and the risks that should be mitigated through proper regulations, include toxic and flammable gas generation within the storage room, "deep seated fires" that create unique hazards due to the occurrence below several layers of protection intended to prevent damage to the BESS, and "thermal runaway" in the use of lithium-ion batteries in which the battery itself releases flammable gas when it overheats.
12. Wis. Stat. § 196.491(3)(d)6.
13. www.psc.wi.gov/Pages/CommissionActions/PublicParticipation.aspx.
14. See Wis. Admin. Code Ch. PSC 2.21.



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WISHING YOU A JOYFUL HOLIDAY SEASON AND A SUCCESSFUL YEAR AHEAD.

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