

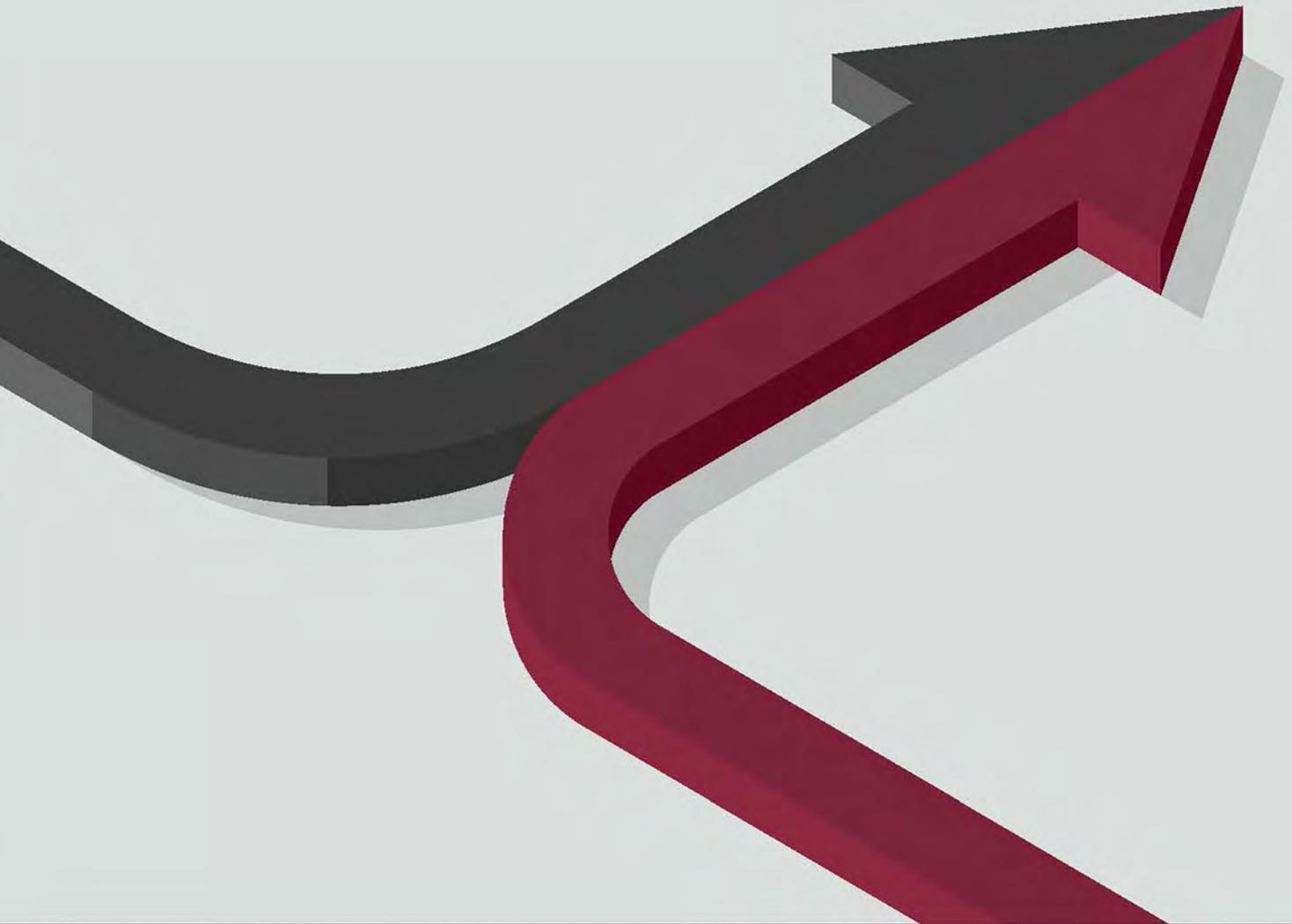
# WISCONSIN Counties

MARCH 2026

# Wisconsin at Work

Supporting Small Businesses  
and Entrepreneurs  
Across the State

**ALSO:** Defining Civic Health | Transportation Delivers Campaign



# INNOVATION, MEET CREATIVITY.

For 30 years Aegis has partnered with our clients to keep them one step ahead of change. This unique approach has always been key to protecting their assets and ensuring success of their programs.

---

**INSURANCE CLAIMS ADMINISTRATION | PROGRAM MANAGEMENT | RISK MANAGEMENT**

---



**Aegis**

a Charles Taylor Company

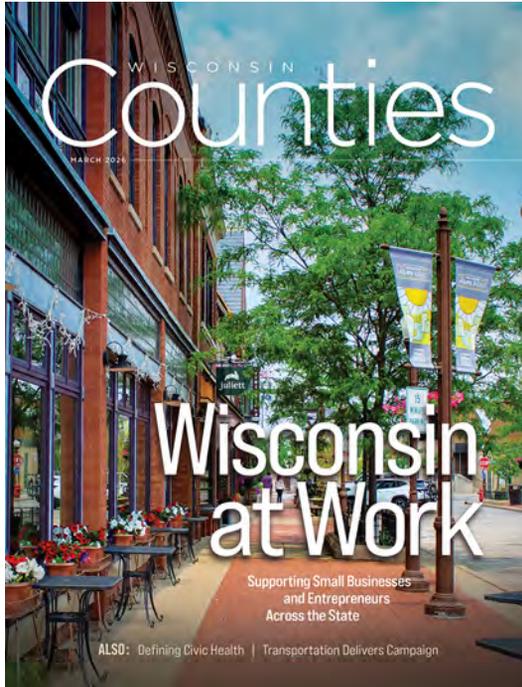
18550 WEST CAPITOL DRIVE | BROOKFIELD, WI 53045

800.236.6885



# WISCONSIN Counties

MARCH 2026 | Volume 90, Number 3



*Cover photo: Downtown Wausau in the River District*

## 6 FEATURE

### Wisconsin at Work

- Today's Labor Market: The Growing Importance of Entrepreneurship
- Building Wisconsin's Workforce for the Future: Local Innovation Strengthens the Talent Pipeline
- The Livability Lens: Rural Communities Shape Their Future
- Vision to Reality: WEDC's Thrive Rural Program Enables Local Leaders to Make Community Visions Real
- Under the Dome: Economic Development Proposals on the Docket

## 4 FROM THE PRESIDENT

Seeing the Future

## 24 RESTORING THE RUN

Rebuilding Northern Pike Habitat in Northeastern Wisconsin

## 28 MEETING THE MOMENT

Defining Civic Health in Wisconsin

## 32 WISCONSIN'S BEAD PROGRAM

Final Proposal Approved

## 34 UNIQUELY WISCONSIN

Marathon County's Children's Imaginarium and Washington County's Chandelier Ballroom

## 36 TRANSPORTATION DELIVERS FOR WISCONSIN

Call for county transportation resolutions

## 38 NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

"In the Board Room" Webinars; National County Government Month; Scholarship Opportunities; WCA District Meetings; Annual Conference Call for Proposals

## 42 FEDERAL UPDATE

Funding, Regulation and Executive Order Updates; United States Exits World Health Organization

## 44 LEGAL ISSUES

Corporation Counsel: Attorney for the Entire County



---

## From the President

---

Mark D. O'Connell

President & CEO

---

# Seeing the Future

Everyone who reads this column cares deeply about the future of our great state and likely has spent time thinking about what we can do today to position Wisconsin for long-term success.

We are doing the same at the association, as we consider the economy, demographic trends, and broader societal changes, and how county government fits into all of it. If counties are to be successful, we need a strong and vibrant private sector. That means we need more people making more money, engaged in more commerce, and paying more taxes at current or lower rates. We need more economic activity, and we need the ingredients necessary for private sector success.

What are those ingredients? While the list is long, it seems to me there are three top factors: access to capital to invest, build, and take risks; infrastructure, including “hard” such as roads, ports, and airports, and “soft” such as broadband; and perhaps most important in today’s knowledge- and technology-driven economy: smart, young talent.

That leads to a natural question: Are we growing, attracting and retaining enough smart, young talent in Wisconsin? If the answer to any part of that question is “no” or “not enough,” then we must ask where that talent is going and why. Numerous studies have examined this issue, including by Forward Analytics, and while there are no simple answers, there are clear patterns to where the smart, young talent is and why they are there.

In earlier decades, when young people moved, it was often for a specific job opportunity. Today, remote work, more contract-based employment, fluid career paths, higher costs of living, and changing expectations are altering the equation. At the same time, many parents have become more accepting of adult children living at home for longer periods, making location decisions more flexible and less directly tied to a specific employer.

As a result, workers, particularly younger ones, are increasingly weighing both employment opportunities and overall quality of life when choosing where to live.

So where is smart, young talent choosing to go? Places that provide them with opportunities for lifelong learning and to develop their skills. Places where it is possible to get around without relying entirely on a car and where broadband is widely available. Places with outdoor recreation and nightlife activities. And places where they can find other smart, young talent. In short, young people are moving to areas with strong quality-of-life attributes, many of which are funded by public investments.

So, if we want to acquire the number one ingredient for private sector profit, then investing in our communities to attract smart, young talent is a wise move. That means giving municipalities and counties the flexibility to invest in the attributes that drive their quality of life, which, in turn, attract young people, fuel the private sector, make our local and state economies flourish, and position our state for future success. ■

---

**Stay connected.**

Visit [wicounties.org](http://wicounties.org) to access resources and learn about events.

# Honoring the Past Building *the* Future

Celebrating 250 Years

Wisconsin Counties Association

## 2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

September 20-22, 2026



**Kalahari Resorts & Conventions**

1305 Kalahari Drive  
Wisconsin Dells, WI 53965

[www.wcaconference.com](http://www.wcaconference.com)

## WISCONSIN Counties

ISSN: 0749-6818  
USPS — 687-940

Official publication of the  
**WISCONSIN COUNTIES ASSOCIATION**

Established under  
Wis. Statute 59.52 (22) for:

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

### MAGAZINE STAFF

**Mark D. O'Connell**  
WCA President & CEO

**Sheri Krause**  
WCA Managing Editor

### POSTMASTER

Send address corrections to:  
Wisconsin Counties Association  
22 E. Mifflin St., Ste. 900  
Madison, WI 53703  
866-404-2700

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

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

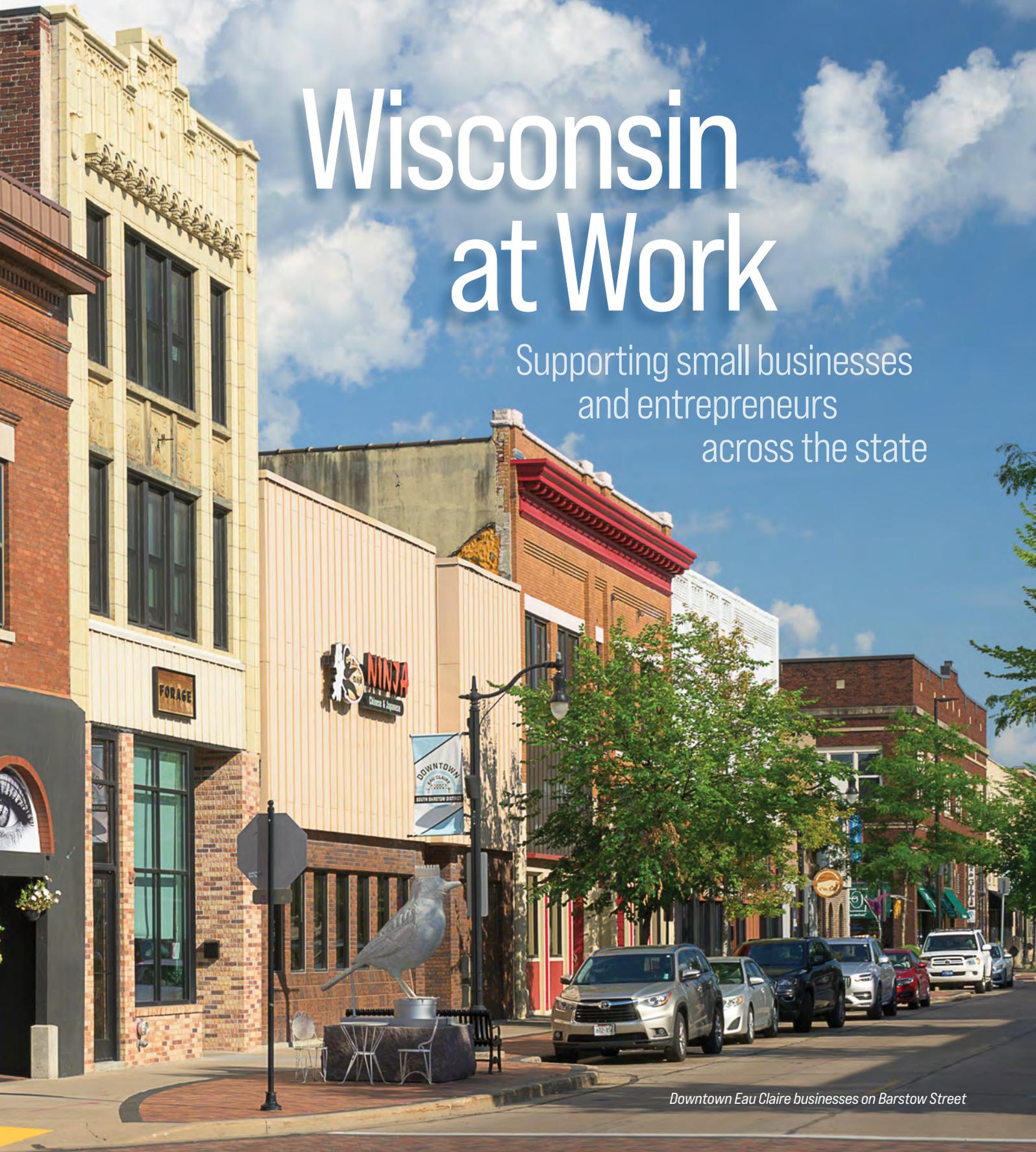
Advertising in this magazine is the  
best way to reach the purchasing  
power of 72 of the largest  
corporate structures in Wisconsin.  
For rates and other information,  
please call WCA at 608-663-7188.  
Toll-free: 866-404-2700

Copyright 2026 by the Wisconsin  
Counties Association. All rights  
reserved. Reproduction of this  
magazine, in whole or in part, is  
permissible only upon express  
written authorization from  
the publisher and when proper  
credit, including copyright  
acknowledgment, is given to  
Wisconsin Counties magazine.

[wicounties.org](http://wicounties.org)

# Wisconsin at Work

Supporting small businesses  
and entrepreneurs  
across the state



*Downtown Eau Claire businesses on Barstow Street*



# Today's Labor Market

## THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

*By Tessa Conroy, Associate Professor, and Steven Deller, Professor, UW-Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and UW-Madison Division of Extension*

Since the Great Recession, the nature of work has been shifting across the economy, but not in the same ways or at the same pace. One of the clearest changes has been the decline of large manufacturers and the rise of much nimbler enterprises, particularly small businesses with no paid employees, consisting of just the owner or owners. These “non-employer” firms, often made up of individual contractors, are becoming increasingly common in rural and urban economies.

As more companies choose to contract for services rather than perform work in-house, fewer new businesses are being created with employees, and more people are working for themselves. While self-employment has long been typical in professions such as law, personal services and accounting, this shift has accelerated in recent years, especially in metropolitan areas.

These changes play out differently across the landscape. Since 2001, job creation in many rural counties has lagged behind most urban areas, in part because rural economies rely more heavily on manufacturing and agriculture. Even as those sectors continue to increase productivity and output, they do so with fewer workers. At the same time, rural communities have seen a slow and steady decline in employer businesses, reducing the number of firms offering traditional jobs with wages and benefits and contributing

to growth in non-employer businesses.

Urban areas, by contrast, have added both employer businesses and jobs. Yet even there, the most rapid growth has occurred among non-employer firms, which now represent the fastest-growing segment of urban economies and are expanding at a pace that far outstrips rural areas.

Taken together, these trends underscore the growing importance of entrepreneurship in today's labor market. Historically, new and young businesses have generated close to half of all new jobs, suggesting that how communities support entrepreneurs will play a central role in shaping future employment growth. Entrepreneurs, often unanchored to a large company, are relatively mobile and can choose where to live, much like many of today's remote workers.

With quality of life playing a major factor in where people decide to live, communities are increasingly approaching economic development through the lens of placemaking. In this “4th wave” of economic development, people, not factories, are the primary driver of growth in a knowledge-driven economy. Planners strategically view public spaces, downtowns, neighborhoods, and natural areas as key to attracting and retaining talent, investment and entrepreneurs who want to live in vibrant, inclusive, distinctive, and livable communities. ■

---

*With these changes in mind, the following series of articles explores what is happening at the state and local levels to support small businesses and entrepreneurs.*

---



# Building Wisconsin's Workforce for the Future



## Local Innovation Strengthens the Talent Pipeline

*By Haley McCoy, Communications Director, and Michael Mosher, Deputy Communications Director, Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development*

**A**s Wisconsin employers navigate shifting skill needs, demographic pressures and evolving career pathways, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development is partnering with local leaders to help communities adapt to the specific trends in their counties. Through the state's Workforce Solutions Initiative and Workforce Innovation Grants, the DWD is supporting projects that address local workforce challenges to help workers, job seekers and employers in a changing 21st-century economy.

### ► **A workforce in transition**

Compared with national averages, Wisconsin continues to experience high employment and historically low unemployment, but the workforce composition is shifting. While some counties are growing, longstanding demographic shifts are causing other counties to see slower population growth or even decline, contributing to ongoing labor shortages. As baby boomer retirements peak, demand for skilled health care professionals to keep the aging

Officials from Northwood Technical College, WHEDA, DWD and the city of Hurley were joined by representatives from two community development financial organizations, Impact Seven and Cinnaire, for the groundbreaking of a workforce housing complex in Hurley. The project is part of the Workforce Innovation Grant-sponsored HOMES project, a partnership between Northwood Technical College and Impact Seven that is developing affordable housing in the region to increase access and provide workforce training in advanced manufacturing tailored to the region's needs.

population healthy is increasing, but there are not enough younger workers to fill open positions. At the same time, many industries are adopting new technologies, creating greater demand for training in advanced manufacturing, health care, information technology and other sectors.

Workers are also charting new paths. Self-employment and microenterprises (small businesses with fewer than 10 employees) have grown in recent years, especially in rural areas, where entrepreneurship plays a key role in local economic resilience. These trends underscore the need for flexible, community-driven workforce solutions.

### ► Local solutions through Workforce Innovation Grants

To address these challenges, Gov. Tony Evers launched the Workforce Solutions Initiative in 2021, charging the DWD and its partners with overseeing key programs to help the economy recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. As one of the initiative's flagship programs, the Workforce Innovation

Grants invest in local and regional projects that strengthen career pathways, expand training capacity and connect residents to high-demand jobs. The grants are designed to meet communities where they are. No two projects look alike, because no two counties face the same workforce needs.

For example, the Waupaca County Economic Development Corporation recognized that limited access to reliable transportation hindered some residents' ability to find and keep a job. The group worked with seven partners to create the Waupaca County Catch-A-Ride program, which provides on-demand workforce transportation and increases employee retention and productivity in the area.

In Door County, officials from United Way and the Door County Housing Partnership used the grant funds to remodel a child care facility and build new workforce housing in the tourist hub, where year-round residents often lack access to these markets.

*Continued on page 10*



Gov. Tony Evers helped open a workforce accelerator training center in St. Croix Falls to address workforce needs in the region. The project is part of the Workforce Innovation Grant-sponsored HOMES project.

Continued from page 9

Across Wisconsin, Workforce Innovation Grant projects have:

- Expanded training in high-need sectors, including nursing, behavioral health, advanced manufacturing and information technology
- Built new education-to-employment pipelines, connecting K-12 students, technical college learners and adult workers to in-demand careers
- Supported entrepreneurship and small business development, especially in rural communities where self-employment is a growing share of the labor market
- Improved access to child care and supportive services, enabling more parents to enter or stay in the workforce
- Strengthened collaboration among counties, employers, schools, nonprofits and workforce boards
- Broken down barriers to employment, such as a lack

of transportation, affordable workforce housing and limited access to child care

These innovations are already making a difference. Technical colleges and training providers have expanded capacity in fields facing critical shortages. Employers have developed new apprenticeship and internship tracks to build talent pipelines. Community organizations have launched transportation, coaching and wraparound services that remove barriers to employment. And counties have gained new tools to support residents seeking stable employment.



#### FOR MORE INFORMATION ...

Learn more about the DWD Workforce Solutions Initiative and the Workforce Innovation Grant Program at [dwd.wisconsin.gov/workforce-solutions](http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/workforce-solutions).

For more about the grant recipients and their innovations, visit [wedc.org/workforce-innovation-grant-recipients](http://wedc.org/workforce-innovation-grant-recipients).

#### ► Examples of local impact

While each project responds to local conditions, several themes stand out across the state.

In health care, Workforce Innovation Grant-funded partnerships have helped address shortages of registered nurses, certified nursing assistants and behavioral health

## Proud of our partnership. Proud of our values.



For more than 40 years, Nationwide® has partnered with the National Association of Counties (NACo) to offer county employees 457(b) deferred compensation plans. Over the years, we have served more than 1.5 million county employees and retirees in the United States.

#### Together we serve:

More than  
**425,000**  
current participants

Nearly  
**3,000**  
participating  
counties and county  
jurisdictions

More than  
**\$24 billion**  
in assets

#### The Nationwide difference

 BETTER PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES

 ADMINISTRATIVE SIMPLICITY

 VALUES THAT TRANSLATE INTO SERVICE



#### For more information, contact:

Levi Lathen

[lathenl@Nationwide.com](mailto:lathenl@Nationwide.com)

Nationwide Retirement Solutions and Nationwide Life Insurance Company (collectively "Nationwide") have endorsement relationships with the National Association of Counties (NACo). More information about the endorsement relationships can be found online at [nrsforu.com](http://nrsforu.com).

Nationwide and the Nationwide N and Eagle are service marks of Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company. © 2022 Nationwide NRM-21963M2-NX (12/22)



## DWD County Workforce Profiles Dashboard

Department of Workforce Development

The County Workforce Profiles provide snapshots of the labor market for every Wisconsin county. Each profile includes analysis of population and population change, industry employment, occupational patterns within industries, labor force dynamics, and employment projections. The 2025 profiles feature a section on the impact of artificial intelligence. **Visit the dashboard at [bit.ly/DWD-CountyProfiles](https://bit.ly/DWD-CountyProfiles).**

professionals. Counties have worked with technical colleges and the Universities of Wisconsin to launch bridge programs, expand clinical training and support workers seeking new credentials.

In manufacturing and the skilled trades, grants have supported investments in schools for mobile labs, applied technology centers, and hands-on equipment that mirror modern worksites. These efforts prepare students and adult learners for high-demand careers in automation, machining, robotics and construction.

Entrepreneurship-support projects have helped residents start or grow businesses ranging from local farms to digital services, through mentorship, capital support and business planning. In many rural counties, these small enterprises contribute significantly to the local job market and overall economic vitality.

### ► A partnership with counties

County officials play a central role in shaping local workforce ecosystems. Through planning, community engagement, and collaboration with employers and educators, counties help align training with economic development goals. The Workforce Solutions Initiative strengthens this work by providing counties with additional tools to address population changes, industry needs and long-term workforce sustainability.

The DWD looks forward to deepening this partnership in the coming year by elevating successful Workforce Innovation Grant projects and by collaborating with counties and local communities to identify future opportunities. Together, we can build a workforce that supports strong businesses, vibrant communities and a resilient statewide economy. ■

*Haley McCoy is the communications director and Michael Mosher is the deputy communications director for the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. The department's primary responsibilities include providing job services, training and employment assistance to people looking for work, at the same time as it works with employers on finding the necessary workers to fill current job openings.*

contact us at [sehinc.com](https://www.sehinc.com) or 800.325.2055

where **innovation** meets **impact**.  
explore what's possible.

**engineers | architects | planners | scientists**  
better places. clean water. infrastructure renewal. mobility.



# THE LIVABILITY LENS

## Rural Communities Shape Their Future

*By Tessa Conroy, Associate Professor, UW-Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, and Community Economic Development Specialist, UW-Madison Division of Extension*

There is a familiar story of decline across rural America: people are leaving, entire industries are shuttering,

essential businesses are closing, and critical institutions are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Making matters worse is the erosion of public investment, civic engagement and volunteerism.

In rural communities, educational attainment, job growth and incomes often lag behind those in urban areas. Despite persistent narratives of decline, broad generalizations can lead to a narrow perception that all rural America is declining, struggling and lagging. But many rural communities are, in fact, thriving.

This is true when considering economic signals of well-being such as job growth, business start-up activity and migration. It is even more evident when we depart



Extension  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

from a growth-centric framework and consider quality of life more broadly, which depends on economic circumstances and a broader set of

factors, including health, infrastructure, social connections, and the natural environment, among others.

A deeper, more nuanced understanding of rural communities is needed. The common notion that “thriving” means “growing” often fails to reflect the realities of rural life. An area might not be growing, but still be a “nice place to live.” Conversely, a growing area may face serious challenges that reduce residents’ quality of life. Many rural communities are doing well economically, attracting people, businesses, and industries, but if we think about what it means to be “doing well” beyond just economic growth, the assessment of rural success becomes more relatable and widespread.

---

## The common notion that “thriving” means “growing” often fails to reflect the realities of rural life.

An area might not be growing, but still be a “nice place to live.”

The Rural Livability Project at UW-Madison aims to highlight and better understand rural communities that are thriving based on factors that go beyond economic growth. We aim to identify place-based community factors, such as sustained public services, access to critical institutions and essential businesses, civic participation, and other characteristics that contribute to the experience of living in a place — a condition we refer to as “livability.”

The challenge is that the factors that contribute to the “livability” of a community vary. What makes a place livable is highly subjective. A person who prioritizes infrastructure such as broadband, for example, might define livability differently than a person who prefers access to outdoor amenities. They will likely choose to live in different communities that could both be considered highly “livable.”

One way to approach the assessment of “livability” is through an inventory of the “Community Capitals” developed by sociologists Mary Emery and Cornelia Butler Flora. The Community Capitals framework recognizes that numerous community attributes, or assets, contribute to a community’s vibrancy, resilience and livability. These are organized into seven capitals: human, financial, built, natural, political, cultural and social.

Human capital assets include those relevant to education, health and leadership. Financial capital refers to the money resources available for investment and development. Built capital refers to infrastructure assets, such as broadband, roads and utilities. Natural capital refers to features of the landscape and environment, including the land, water, air and weather. Political capital refers to the ability of community members to influence decision-making



processes and policies. Cultural capital includes the traditions, history, heritage, values and arts of a place. Social capital refers to the networks, trust, and cooperation between residents of similar or dissimilar backgrounds.

While individuals may vary in how they value the seven community capitals in assessing their own community, the idea is that all capitals contribute to livability. Considering a community’s assets across all seven capitals can support a more holistic assessment of what it has to offer.

When we evaluate places using this multifaceted list of factors, the outcome differs substantially from that of evaluating them based on growth alone. In some cases, rural communities do much better. Anecdotally, this rings true. Often, our conversations with rural residents indicate that, even in places with moderate or stagnant population or job growth, there are many other valuable community features that contribute to the quality of life and overall livability.

This pivot toward considering livability beyond growth changes the narrative of rural communities and what it means for the well-being of rural residents. Whereas the focus on economic outcomes is commonly tied to economic development strategies that target job growth and monetary indicators, focusing on livability introduces a new wave of economic development that emphasizes people: what they find appealing and what improves their quality of life. Indeed, this new wave of economic development is supported by data. Increasingly, jobs follow people rather than the traditional idea that people follow jobs.

The implication is that emphasizing livability can help retain and attract people. As a community’s primary

*Continued on page 14*

Continued from page 13

asset, people offer their talent as employees, leaders, and volunteers; start businesses; rent and buy housing; and send their children to school. Livability plays a role in retaining people by ensuring their needs are met across all stages of life. It plays a role in bringing young people back and attracting newcomers, particularly footloose entrepreneurs or remote workers who could live anywhere. Rural communities that have cultivated a diverse set of assets will have an advantage in attracting them and, in turn, benefit from their economic and non-economic contributions to the community.

### ► The Rural Livability Project

As part of the Wisconsin Rural Partnership Institute, the Rural Livability Project team uses diverse data, advanced methods, and comprehensive analytical frameworks to

go beyond growth to uncover the mechanisms that drive livability — what makes somewhere a good place to live,

work and raise a family. By developing locally informed tools that keep rural at the center, we're empowering communities to recognize their strengths, confront their challenges,

and make informed choices about how to invest in their communities. Explore our work through interactive maps and keep up with the team as we continue our mission towards sustaining and advancing rural livability. ■

*Tessa Conroy is an economic development specialist and associate professor at UW-Madison. She works in the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics and the Division of Extension. Her work focuses broadly on regional economic development, with a focus on rural communities and leading the Rural Livability Project.*

*This work is supported by the Institute for Rural Partnerships, project award no. 2023-70500-38915, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and should not be construed to represent any official USDA or U.S. government determination or policy.*



#### LEARN MORE

Visit [go.wisc.edu/rural-livability-resources](https://go.wisc.edu/rural-livability-resources).

**OMNIA**<sup>®</sup>  
PARTNERS

## Your ally in the purchasing process

OMNIA Partners is the nation's largest and most experienced cooperative purchasing organization, proudly serving Wisconsin public agencies with a portfolio of 1,100+ contract solutions from trusted suppliers.



Scan to view our contract portfolio  
or visit  
[omniapartners.com/gaa-contracts](https://omniapartners.com/gaa-contracts)



## illuminating Products, Programs and Services for Local Governments

The success of WCA Services, Inc. is due in part to our insistence on high corporate standards from companies that provide counties and other public entities with meaningful solutions.

Explore programs and services offered through both WCA Services, Inc.  
and the Wisconsin Counties Association at [www.wcasi.com](http://www.wcasi.com).

**Trust is at the foundation of all we do.**

22 E. Mifflin St., Suite 900 | Madison, WI 53703  
PHONE 608.222.8520 | FAX 608.222.8634 | [www.wcasi.com](http://www.wcasi.com)





## CASE STUDY:

# We're In This Together

## HOW LOCAL LEADERS REIMAGINED GILMAN'S FUTURE

*By Deilee Calvert, Communications Manager, UW-Madison Division of Extension*

Gilman School District Superintendent Wally Leipart is acutely aware of how dependent his district and its students are on the community's success. In the last decade, Leipart has seen the local grocery store and other businesses close, leaving buildings empty. "All of a sudden, we were struggling to even get ambulance services on a consistent basis," he said. "If we don't have a community, we are not going to have a school." Knowing that losing critical institutions and services makes it more difficult to live in rural places and have a thriving community prompted Leipart to take action.

### ► Working together to define shared goals

Leipart brought together a team of community leaders and proposed that the school and community share common goals. The team learned about a pilot program being run by UW-Madison Extension and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation Office of Rural Prosperity that could help them get started: the Community Economic Analysis for Rural Wisconsin Communities (CEA-RWC). Through this connection, Extension partnered with Gilman to provide evidence-based research tools and connect Gilman to additional resources, such as grants.

CEA-RWC fosters community leadership, identifies economic factors, explores policy options, and develops action plans. Because the communities selected for the CEA-RWC programs are typically larger than Gilman's population, Leipart applied to the program as a school district serving

17 towns and villages across four counties — Rusk, Taylor, Chippewa and Clark.

"In a small community, the school district is oftentimes the center of engagement and activities," said Leipart, "So we asked them to consider looking at the community being the boundaries of a school district instead of just a village." The district became one of five communities in the pilot program.

Analyzing data helped the group understand both their needs and opportunities for enhancing local livability, which resulted in identifying three priorities: 1) creating a vibrant main street, 2) increasing volunteerism and community engagement, and 3) fostering a growth mindset and quality of life. Those priorities are now embedded in a strategic plan for the schools and the community, creating unified goals for everyone to work toward.

"Just pulling in the right team made a difference in who was going to step up," said Candice Gruneth, the Gilman village clerk. "I think everybody knew how important this was."

### ► Putting goals into action

Michelle Grimm, Taylor County's Community Development Extension educator, helped the group move forward on their identified goals. "The first one was a vibrant main street. That's perfect for a design charrette," said Grimm. Design charrettes, a community visioning program through Extension's Design Wisconsin, bring a team of volunteer professionals together to gather public

input. They turn those ideas into a shared vision for the future, generating tangible action steps. Grimm made the connection and helped them do the necessary prep work.

The visioning process inspired one of its community participants, Taylor County Board supervisor Lynn Rosemeyer, to make additional investments in the Gilman community. She and her husband purchased a plot of land that will be developed into housing, a need identified by the community.

“That event really inspired me in many ways. Just to see the engagement from our community, and particularly from our students who spoke so well. The things that they told us about, how many of them want to stay in our community. I truly was not aware of that,” said Rosemeyer.

### ► Keeping things moving

Compiling community input and developing strategic priorities created new energy and focus. It also provided the information needed for grant applications. Grunseth was able to file for a tax increment district, an Idle Site Redevelopment Program grant from WEDC, a Main Street (Vibrant Space) grant, and, together with the city of Medford, a small business “fix-it” loan.

“One key thing for the Idle Site grant was: what is the

community doing, besides just working with the developers? What are they doing to move Gilman forward?” said Grunseth. Having the CEA-RWC report and the design charrette allowed her to submit successful applications.

Having strategic priorities has kept the energy alive. They’ve rebranded events and are starting to see how they can use their assets to bring in new business and tourists. Through it all, they’ve learned a lot.

“I don’t know if we really realized how many entrepreneurs we had in our community. When you open up the Vault Village boutique and coffee shop, and you have some 40 or 50 vendors who want to come in, and Celebration Hall opens up with event space and a bakery and florist, and they have other people who want to come in, you know, there’s more economic growth. Very, very small niches and markets, but collectively, it’s pretty significant,” said Leipart.

Agreeing on three strategic priorities has helped maintain focus. Leipart, Grunseth and Rosemeyer are continually seeking new opportunities and ideas, and now they know what kinds of programs they need to move Gilman forward. “Whether you dream big or dream small, it takes the same amount of mental effort to do it. So, you might as well dream big,” said Leipart. ■

## ► ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**The Gilman community** used several resources that are available to communities in Wisconsin. To find more information on these programs, visit [go.wisc.edu/rural-livability-resources](http://go.wisc.edu/rural-livability-resources).

- **Community Economic Analysis for Rural Wisconsin Communities.** The CEA-RWC program is a joint effort between UW-Madison Extension and the WEDC Office of Rural Prosperity to bring a structured community economic development program to rural Wisconsin communities. The program equips small communities with strategic planning tools to build a prosperous future, with a focus on strengthening local economic development efforts.
- **Design Wisconsin, UW-Madison Extension.** A community visioning program that builds and motivates positive community change. Through community design charrettes, a team of professional volunteers use public participation methods to discover a shared vision for the future and generate energy to pursue that vision.
- **Thrive Rural, WEDC Office of Rural Prosperity.** The Thrive Rural Wisconsin program is designed to help rural and tribal communities bring together local leadership, define shared goals and access the resources they need to make lasting change.

- **Main Street and Connect Community Program, WEDC.** Vibrant main streets and community corridors don’t just happen. They require planning, nurturing, interest and action from many stakeholders who share a vision for the future. WEDC’s two downtown programs, can help your community bring that vision to life.
- **Small Business Development Grant, WEDC.** The WEDC’s Small Business Development Grant Program encourages communities and economic development partners to invest in their small businesses. The program offers financial incentives for these communities and organizations to develop innovative programs that directly support small businesses and small business creation. The program’s goal is to support economic development programs that aim to broaden access to capital for small businesses in Wisconsin.
- **Redevelopment Program, WEDC.** Redeveloped idle industrial, institutional and commercial sites can again become generators for economic development and an improved quality of life for the cities and communities where they are located. WEDC’s Idle Sites Redevelopment Program helps communities pursue this opportunity.



# VISION TO REALITY

## WEDC's Thrive Rural Program Enables Local Leaders to Make Community Visions Real

*By Beth Haskovec, Senior Director, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation Office of Rural Prosperity*

A recurring challenge in rural development is not that communities lack vision or ambition; they just don't have access to the same resources — grant-writing support, professional project management, or the staff needed to navigate complex funding pipelines — as their bigger neighbors.

In 2023, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation's Office of Rural Prosperity created Thrive Rural Wisconsin to provide rural and tribal communities with access to these critical resources. This program builds



on the Office of Rural Prosperity's "Rural Voices Report," in which rural stakeholders told Gov. Tony Evers' Blue-Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity that they needed programs

focused on rural needs with flexible capital to prepare communities to compete for additional investment.

Under Thrive Rural, 10 communities (each with fewer than 10,000 people and outside metropolitan areas) are receiving up to \$50,000 in predevelopment grants for: feasibility studies, architectural renderings, and business plans; two years of technical assistance in planning, grant-

## OFFICE OF RURAL PROSPERITY STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



### HOUSING



### CAPACITY BUILDING



### SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT



### BROADBAND

writing, fundraising mapping, and project management; and ongoing referrals and guidance to consultants and state and federal agencies. The first cohort is now concluding their capacity-building grants and moving their initiatives from planning to implementation.

The projects include:

- The Vilas County Economic Development Corporation worked with the town of Phelps to acquire and demolish a former hospital. A redevelopment plan is underway to create a more welcoming gateway to the community, which local officials believe will spur additional development.
  - Marinette County and InVenture North are working with the village of Wausaukee and the city of Peshtigo to attract a high-quality housing development that they hope will also serve as a template for other rural communities in Marinette County and across Wisconsin.
  - Shawano County Economic Progress, Inc. is working with the village of Bonduel to attract more single-family and multifamily housing and revive its aging downtown. Thrive Rural Wisconsin assisted with the creation of a redevelopment authority and is working on a redevelopment plan for the downtown.
  - The Sawyer County/Lac Courte Oreilles Economic Development Corporation is working with tribal and county governments to develop a business incubator to promote entrepreneurship in the Hayward area and beyond.
  - The Kewaunee County Economic Development Corporation is working with county stakeholders to complete a comprehensive housing study to assess the needs and identify sites for future development.
- The Bayfield County Housing Authority is working with the town of Bell to increase affordable housing for senior citizens, which may serve as a catalyst for additional residential development in the broader community.
  - The Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians is working to implement the tribe's economic diversification; redevelop a former casino; and create a mixed-use village, incorporating retail, commercial, residential, and community development.
  - Gays Mills Connect Communities, Driftless Development, Inc., is working with the village of Gays Mills to create a public gathering space, consolidate local government and service agencies in one location, and promote additional housing development.
  - Wood County worked with the city of Pittsville and the Pittsville School District to establish Cran City, a nonprofit community development organization, create outdoor recreation and housing plans, and support small business development in the community.
  - The Vernon County Energy District is working with area municipalities to pursue local energy generation and improved resiliency for community facilities, including the creation of solar generating facilities and a microgrid for emergencies.

These projects illustrate how small grants and technical assistance can serve as a catalyst for communities through community engagement, the creation of redevelopment plans, and site-specific projects that transform dormant properties and underused spaces into engines of growth.

The comprehensive package is aimed at giving rural leaders the tools and direction to move from idea to implementation, enabling them to attract larger

*Continued on page 20*

## The comprehensive package is aimed at giving rural leaders the tools and direction to move from idea to implementation...

Continued from page 19

investments to address housing, community facilities, economic development, small business growth, and sustainable energy needs.

While plan preparation and site redevelopment are at the core of many Thrive Rural projects, the program also aims to encourage economic diversification, entrepreneurship, affordable housing, and sustainable energy.

Thrive Rural derives most of its support from Office of Rural Prosperity staff, but it also taps into a broader rural development network that includes Resource Rural, a consortium of national philanthropic organizations; regional economic development organizations throughout the state; planning commissions; and UW-Extension. These partnerships ensure Thrive Rural is holistic, not a standalone grant program, that will build community-level momentum and capacity over time.

Thrive Rural's inaugural cohort ended in December 2025. The program has already created local wins for the participating communities. Kathy Schmitz from Vilas County Economic Development has worked with their local leadership team to tackle a blighted property in the town of Phelps.

"As a result of Rural Wisconsin, the town of Phelps now has a clear vision of what the property could contribute to the local economy, which includes specific development plans," Schmitz says. "Given its location overlooking North Twin Lake and being a 'gateway' to Phelps as you enter town, the site offers an ideal commercial development opportunity which can bolster the economy and tax base, create jobs, and provide additional incentive for people to visit the Phelps area."

The town of Phelps used these plans to secure \$75,000 from WEDC's Idle Sites program to prepare the site for future development.

The Offices of Rural Prosperity is building on the successes and lessons learned from the initial cohort and will begin working with a new cohort of communities in 2026.

For county leaders and rural advocates, Thrive Rural has already offered important lessons: capacity building delivers results when funding alone cannot; local leadership teams matter; and multi-sector coordination maximizes impact.

As the pilot matures, Thrive Rural may well serve as a model for rural renewal beyond Wisconsin, creating an environment where communities chart their futures with expert guidance, tools and opportunity at hand.

The message is clear: When small communities have the tools to grow and are fully empowered, they don't just survive — they thrive. ■

*Beth Haskovec is the senior director of the Office of Rural Prosperity for the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, the state's lead economic development organization.*



### TO LEARN MORE

Visit [ruralwi.com/thrive-rural-wisconsin](https://ruralwi.com/thrive-rural-wisconsin).

Who has energy options to fit my needs?

Constellation, the endorsed energy supplier for WCA, offers comprehensive energy solutions and a variety of pricing options for electric, natural gas, and renewable energy products for organizations of any size, in every competitive energy market across the U.S.

To learn more about participating in the Constellation Energy Program, please contact Rich Cialabrine at [richard.cialabrine@constellation.com](mailto:richard.cialabrine@constellation.com) or 847.738.2510.

 [associations.constellation.com/wca](https://associations.constellation.com/wca)

© 2025 Constellation. The offerings described herein are those of either Constellation NewEnergy, Inc., Constellation NewEnergy-Gas Division, LLC or Constellation Navigator, LLC, affiliates of each other. Brand names and product names are trademarks or service marks of their respective holders. All rights reserved.

# The Wisconsin County Mutual, Because Risk Doesn't Play Fair.

We know that emergencies don't wait. Cybersecurity threats don't pause. And our employees are on the frontlines of countless risks daily.

Counties have hard jobs—and we make sure they never have to do them alone.

**The County Mutual is owned by member counties.  
No outsiders. No shareholders.**

**Working in unison with your county,  
it's a Mutual Effort.**



USERNAME

\*\*\*\*\*

Remember me  Forgot password

LOGIN



## RISK MANAGEMENT SERVICES

On-Site Safety and Risk Management Training | Risk Assessment & Consultation | Online Training  
MILO Firearms Training Systems | Cyber Risk Assessment

Corporate Management Wisconsin Counties Association | General Administration Charles Taylor

   | 866.404.2700 | 800.236.6885



## UNDER THE DOME

# Economic Development Proposals on the Docket

*By Dave Armstrong, State Representative, 67th Assembly District*

The importance of economic development can be summed up in the saying, “A rising tide lifts all boats.” A healthy economic climate means strong businesses, well-paid employees, desirable communities, and successful schools, all of which support one another in a virtuous cycle.

It has been my privilege since 2013 to serve as executive director of the Barron County Economic Development Corporation, where I frequently work with entrepreneurs on their business plans, financial forecasts and site selection. I also serve Barron County and parts of Chippewa and Dunn counties in the State Assembly. Serving in the Legislature has been an incredible opportunity to encourage economic development at the state level. In addition to introducing legislation, I serve on several committees that review proposals related to economic development. These include

the Housing and Real Estate; Jobs and Economy; Ways and Means; and Workforce Development, Labor, and Integrated Employment committees.

The 2025-26 legislative session has seen many economic development proposals introduced. These range from helping startups to assisting specific industries, such as biofuels and nuclear energy. Other proposals recognize the importance that housing and child care play in supporting economic development.

The final 2025-27 state budget included several provisions related to economic development, such as a program to



*Rep. Dave Armstrong*

## Economic development proposals introduced in the 2025-26 legislative session range from helping startups to assisting specific industries, such as biofuels and nuclear energy.

Other proposals recognize the importance that housing and child care play in supporting economic development.

attract talent from other states, tax incentives to encourage film production in Wisconsin, and bridge payments to child care providers to help them stay in business.

Beyond the budget, some economic development proposals are intended to help startups get off the ground. Assembly Bills 565 and 566 update the eligibility requirements for participating in the Qualified New Business Venture program, which incentivizes investment in early-stage Wisconsin businesses. Another proposal, Assembly Bill 397, updates reporting requirements for recipients of grants and loans from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation to reduce compliance costs, which is a particular concern for smaller businesses.

Other economic development legislation targets specific industries. These include tax credits for video game production, sustainable aviation fuel production and nuclear energy generation. Besides tax credits, proposals create or update incentives — or reduce barriers — for nuclear fusion technology projects, contract research organizations, and home-based food producers.

As the economic development director and state legislator for a rural part of the state, I am particularly encouraged by legislation that benefits rural Wisconsin. Reliable access to the internet is crucial, especially in rural areas. Assembly Bill 208 permanently exempts state and federal broadband funding from the income tax, freeing up more money for broadband expansion in unserved and underserved areas. More specific to rural Wisconsin, Assembly Bill 159 creates rural creative economy development grants to promote the arts and encourage tourism, and Assembly Bill 182 updates the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit to include a carve out for rural projects.

This last point brings me to two issues that I believe are critical for encouraging economic development in Wisconsin — housing and child care. In my experience at the state and county levels, no one wants to work where they can't afford to live and there's no one to watch the



kids. This is just as true for entrepreneurs and small business owners as it is for employees.

One bill that dealt with housing and child care, Assembly Bill 280, was signed into law as 2025 Act 78. It follows up on

legislation from the 2023-24 session and allows

businesses to claim the Business Development Tax Credit for investments in workforce housing and child care. Another proposal to encourage employer participation in child care is Assembly Bill 369, which creates a state tax credit that mirrors an existing federal tax credit for businesses that offer child care services for employees.

On the housing front, Assembly Bill 194 reduces barriers to participation in three Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority housing programs the Legislature enacted last session and makes the competitive loans more generous. The Assembly also passed a housing package this past fall, including residential tax incremental districts, updated zoning practices for proposed residential development, and condominium conversion reimbursement grants.

I could go into much more detail about each of the proposals in this article — not to mention the proposals I couldn't include due to space — but I hope it gives a sense of the many ways in which my legislative colleagues and I are working to improve Wisconsin's economic climate.

I wrote this article before the legislative session ended, so not all the bills mentioned here will have passed by the time you read this, but many of those that haven't will likely be reintroduced next session, along with new proposals. For example, I am working on a county room tax to boost tourism. In any case, I expect that economic development, housing and child care will be high on the agenda for the 2027-28 session.

Our state has a lot to offer, but there's always more to be done, and legislators are always looking for ideas! ■

*State Rep. Dave Armstrong (R-Rice Lake) has represented the 67th Assembly District since 2021. In the state Assembly, he chairs the Committee on Small Business Development, serves as vice chair of the Committee on Rural Development and is a member of several other committees. Armstrong is also the executive director of the Barron County Economic Development Corporation.*



# RESTORING THE RUN

## Rebuilding Northern Pike Habitat in Northeastern Wisconsin

A key predator in Wisconsin’s aquatic ecosystems, northern pike in Green Bay depend on the coastal wetlands and small tributaries along the western shore of the bay to spawn and thrive. Over time, however, roughly 80% of these crucial wetlands have been lost. As their habitat disappeared, northern pike populations declined sharply — an early warning of broader stress in the watershed.

Recognizing both the ecological importance of northern pike and the chance to protect the watershed, a long-term effort emerged to reconnect remaining wetlands, reopen shallow channels, and remove barriers to fish movement. Brown County and the Oneida Nation, building on earlier work by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, began making notable improvements in 2007, with Oconto and Marinette counties soon following.

Working closely with numerous public and private partners, their decades-long work to protect northern pike has evolved into a broader, landscape-scale restoration effort.

### ► Understanding the fish — and the waterways — behind the work

Restoring northern pike habitat begins with understanding how closely the species’ life cycle is tied to water depth, timing, vegetation and connectivity. To spawn, northern

pike rely on shallow, flooded wetlands and slow-moving tributaries that come alive each spring.

“The northern pike in Green Bay are unique,” explained DNR fisheries biologist Tammie Paoli. Spawning typically begins in March or April, often before the ice has fully left the bay. “They’ll migrate up any waterway or wetland, including ditches,” she said.

Once water temperatures reach the upper 30s, eggs are deposited on submerged vegetation. The fry hatch in about a week and depend on shallow, stable water conditions. Flooded hay fields or ditched streams may attract spawning fish, but rapidly receding water can strand both adults and young.

Decades of ditching and straightening streams to drain land more quickly compounded the problem. “Those channels are deeper than they used to be and often disconnected from nearby wetlands,” said Chuck Druckrey, water resource specialist with the Marinette County Land and Water Conservation Division. Straightened channels, undersized culverts, and elevated road crossings speed water flow and restrict fish passage. “Northern pike are not good jumpers,” Paoli noted.

### ► Brown County’s work

Familiar with earlier DNR successes, the Brown County Land

◀ An aerial image during the 2020 construction of a northern pike spawning area on state land.

*Photo credit: Brown County LWCD*

& Water Conservation Department secured Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) funding in 2007 to launch a comprehensive northern pike habitat restoration effort.

Led by former staff members Jim Jolly, Mike Mushinski and Larry Kriese, the county partnered with state, county, and town highway departments to identify barriers, remove obstructions, and restore shallow, grassy wetlands critical to spawning. Projects were tailored to local conditions, reflecting differences in water depth, vegetation, temperature, and hydrology.

Since then, Brown County has worked with public and private landowners to complete 64 projects across the watershed.

A standout example is the Brown Road Northern Pike Spawning Marsh in the town of Little Suamico. Constructed in 2020 on state land, the project includes six interconnected spawning marshes totaling five acres and more than 3,200 feet of grassed channels. Connected directly to the Brown Road ditch, a well-known pike migration corridor less than a mile from Green Bay, the site has become one of the most heavily used spawning areas along the bay's west shore.

As Brown County began its work, the Oneida Nation had already begun restoring the south branch of the Suamico River, returning the channel to a more natural, meandering form. According to tribal water resources supervisor Jim Snitgen, the project lengthened the channel by 400 feet and established 8.2 acres of native riparian vegetation.

Their work slowed the water and reconnected floodplains. "We established monitoring sites to ensure we were improving hydrology, enhancing northern pike spawning habitat, and improving aquatic habitat overall," Snitgen said.

### ▶ **Oconto County joins and expands the effort**

With 26 miles of Green Bay shoreline, Oconto County joined the work in 2011 through a Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grant.

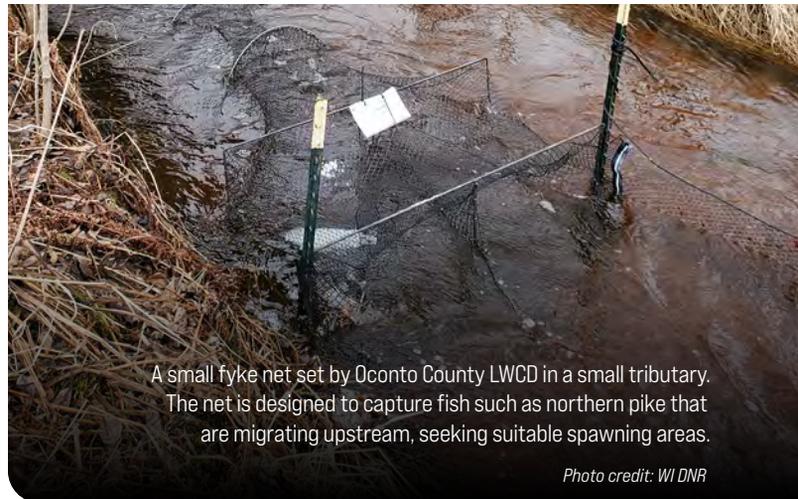
"We began with northern pike as our focal species, but it soon became clear that many other species benefited from our work," said Ken Dolata, Oconto County conservationist.

County staff conducted detailed field surveys, documenting blocked channels, undersized culverts, and wetlands disconnected by decades of alteration. "Our goal



A 3-inch young-of-year northern pike captured in a box trap as it is migrating downstream to Green Bay.

*Photo credit: WI DNR*



A small fyke net set by Oconto County LWCD in a small tributary. The net is designed to capture fish such as northern pike that are migrating upstream, seeking suitable spawning areas.

*Photo credit: WI DNR*

was simple," Dolata said. "Remove as many impediments and restore as many acres of wetlands as possible."

After initial grant funding ended in 2016, NRDA funding allowed the work to continue. To date, Oconto County has completed 84 projects, reopened roughly 200 miles of streams to fish movement, and restored 20 acres of wetlands.

Each spring, Oconto County staff traps and tags adult northern pike migrating upstream, followed by trapping of newly hatched fish to assess spawning success a few weeks later.

One 2019 project on county forest land restored historic spawning wetlands by reconnecting two one-acre basins with a shallow channel. "Through our spring trapping, we average about 150 adult pike entering those wetlands each year," Dolata said. The site has also become a waterfowl viewing area and outdoor classroom.

### ▶ **Marinette County builds on regional momentum**

In 2021, Marinette County also secured NRDA funding to reconnect northern pike with historic spawning grounds and improve wetland habitat, with a particular emphasis on the Peshtigo River.

*Continued on page 26*



Photo credit: Oconto County

▲ The spawning scrapes in Oconto County become a classroom as children help net young pike and other aquatic creatures.

*Continued from page 25*

Downstream from the first dam, the Peshtigo River corridor includes more than 6,700 acres of public land and extensive private holdings, forming one of the most intact habitat complexes along Wisconsin’s Lake Michigan shoreline. DNR records identify the area as part of a Wisconsin Conservation Opportunity Area of global concern, containing nearly half of all remaining wetlands on Lake Michigan.

According to county conservationist Sheri Denowski, the county’s largest project to date stabilizes roughly one-third of a mile of eroding streambank along a section of the Peshtigo River known as the Hemlock Curve.

“After four years of planning, construction began this winter using bioengineered, nature-based solutions, including stone sized for fish spawning, root wads, live stakes, native plantings, and stream barbs, to stabilize banks while creating habitat,” said Denowski. As part of the grant, the project will be used as a demonstration site, showcasing alternatives to traditional hard-armoring approaches.

During the spring runoff, staff walk the ditches and wetlands in the area to help pinpoint blocked movement and locations where shallow wetland scrapes, which, when kept connected and holding water into mid-summer, can give young pike time to develop before migrating to Green Bay.

► **A regional coalition shaped by shared leadership**

What began as a response to declining northern pike populations has grown into a broad regional effort involving county land and water departments, the DNR, the Oneida Nation, The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, UW–Green Bay researchers, local highway departments, conservation groups, and private landowners.



Photo credit: Oconto County

▲ In the spring, children join the Oconto County staff in measuring and tagging the fish. Getting to name the fish they tag is part of the fun.

According to Nick Peltier, Brown County conservationist, the NRDA funding has been a critical catalyst in improving water quality and wildlife in the same area. “Over time, we have refined an approach that designs spawning areas with varied depths, temperatures, vegetation, and flow conditions, ensuring that, even with fluctuating water levels, suitable spawning habitat is available.”

“Unlike cold-water trout habitat restoration, which has books written about it, northeastern Wisconsin counties had to figure this out on their own,” said Paoli. “The work these counties have done holds lessons for the rest of the state. Counties everywhere should be thinking about culverts — not just to move water, but to help aquatic species move freely.”

While northern pike remain a focal species, the benefits extend far beyond a single fish. Restored wetlands improve water quality, reduce erosion, support waterfowl and amphibians, and reconnect fragmented landscapes.

For those closest to the work, the payoff arrives each spring as fish return to waters that had been inaccessible for decades. “Watching these wetlands recover and seeing the community take pride in them is one of the most rewarding parts of the job,” Dolata said.

Along Green Bay’s west shore, restoring the run is about more than fish. It is about rebuilding connections between land, water, wildlife and people. ■



# Go all in on group health plans designed for lower costs



## Customizable plans and flexible administrative services—it's all here

Get in on the WCA Group Health Trust and UMR, where individually negotiated rates are just one of the ways our plans are designed to help you manage costs. You can customize your offering by bundling health and supplemental plans, too—which could mean even more savings. And it's all backed by a system that's built for easier plan management.

## Are you in?

Contact Trina Kiefer at 1-866-404-2700 or [kiefer@wicounties.org](mailto:kiefer@wicounties.org).

Minimum participation requirements may apply for bundling programs. Benefits and programs may not be available in all states or for all group sizes. Components subject to change.

Insurance coverage provided by or through UnitedHealthcare Insurance Company or its affiliates.

B2B EI243153973.0 5/24 © 2024 United HealthCare Services, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 24-3150750-B

**United  
Healthcare®**

**UMR**  
A UnitedHealthcare Company

# Meeting the Moment

## DEFINING CIVIC HEALTH IN WISCONSIN

By Mary Beth Collins, Executive Director, UW-Madison Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies

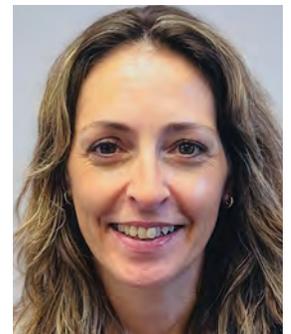
Nearly 200 years ago, French philosopher and diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville observed that everyday citizen engagement and voluntary association were foundational to American democracy. Today, we are living through conditions that highlight the importance and fragility of civic health and demand a renewed commitment to it if we are to seek a positive future together.

The Civic Health of Wisconsin Initiative, housed by the UW-Madison Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies, defines civic health as “individual and collective engagement for communities to define and address public problems, and work toward conditions in which all can



truly thrive, and which promote democracy.”

Historically, the term “civic health” was used primarily in research and policy contexts to describe the extent and ways in which people participate in civic life. Measures typically included voting, attending public meetings, contacting elected officials, discussing public issues, joining groups, making social connections, volunteering, and donating to nonprofits.



Mary Beth Collins

**Civic health** describes our collective capacity to work together to face and address challenges; build and sustain trust in each other and critical institutions; engage around shared concerns and across different views; and participate in pro-democratic processes and systems.





## COMMUNITY CONFERENCE ON CIVIC HEALTH

April 27 | Various Locations

Join the **Civic Health of Wisconsin Initiative** for the biennial CommUnity Conference on Civic Health on April 27 in Madison or at one of the satellite sites in Stevens Point, Oshkosh or Dodgeville.

The event will bring together community leaders, nonprofit professionals, and UW students, faculty, and researchers to discuss civic health with the goal of opening access to information, creating spaces for social togetherness, deterring political polarization, empowering underrepresented groups, and upholding democracy.

All are welcome. To learn more and register visit [commnsknowledge.wisc.edu/civichealth](https://commnsknowledge.wisc.edu/civichealth).

Today, the term is used more broadly across society and the media to describe our collective capacity to work together to face and address challenges; build and sustain trust in each other and critical institutions; engage around shared concerns and across different views; and participate in pro-democratic processes and systems.

Notable features of the current era — the rapid acceleration of technology; a transformed information and media landscape marked by the decline of local media and the explosion of digital platforms; declining democratic systems and indicators globally; eroding trust in key institutions; concerning levels of polarization and political violence; and the lasting effects of a global pandemic that increased our isolation and separation — have challenged our capacity for civic health and posed significant threats to a hopeful collective future.

Meeting this moment requires a shared commitment to civic health, especially among community leaders, as a framework for approaching pressing challenges, identifying and acting on opportunities to strengthen communities and democracy, and finding optimal solutions for pluralistic groups.

The framework of civic health is important generally, but can also be used in specific disciplinary endeavors critical to our communities. In public health, officials are recognizing the interdependence of individual physical and mental health, population health, and civic participation. There is a growing awareness of the risks of social isolation and loneliness to individual well-being, community connection and civic life. In education, the interrelatedness of civic health and civics education is coming into focus as communities grapple with the role and purpose of educational institutions, from K-12 to higher education.

A powerful aspect of civic health is that everyone can play a meaningful role in building it. While the concept is broad and collective, participation can be personal and customized.

Around the world and throughout history, “civic health heroes” have demonstrated this power through everyday actions: providing mutual aid and volunteering, helping

neighbors, serving in public office, peacefully protesting and boycotting, voting and participating in public systems, collaborating on difficult local issues, innovating strategies and tools to support communities, and connecting across differences. Each of us can contribute in ways that align with our values, skills, and sense of where we can make a difference.

The present moment is a critical time for individuals, institutions and communities to embrace and contribute to civic health by taking any of the following actions:

- Supporting independent media and pursuing media literacy and discernment
- Strengthening civics education across K-12, higher education and lifelong learning
- Providing trustworthy information and access to, and participating in, elections and public processes
- Expanding and taking advantage of opportunities to support and volunteer with nonprofit, faith-based and informal community groups
- Supporting and participating in groups, events and spaces that lead to cross-generational community connection
- Teaching and learning constructive dialogue skills to effectively connect with others across differences of viewpoint and experience

*Continued on page 30*

Continued from page 29

- Encouraging, supporting and exploring pathways into public service
- Supporting educators, librarians, clerks, and public officials in navigating complex challenges
- Building shared skills for understanding issues, expressing perspectives and collaborating on solutions

A critical starting point for our civic health journey and action plan is learning. We can all, individually and in our workplaces and communities, seek out reliable information about the current state of civic health in Wisconsin and beyond, historic precedents, lessons about civic health and its vulnerabilities, and the many existing, promising local efforts to nurture and heal civic health. Gaining a grounding in this type of background and sharing this understanding with others helps build momentum for a more hopeful civic future and helps us choose which civic health actions we wish to commit to and work on in our personal lives, professional roles and communities.



#### MORE RESOURCES

Visit [commnsknowledge.wisc.edu/civichealth](https://commnsknowledge.wisc.edu/civichealth) to access resources and contact staff.

To learn more, engage with the Civic Health of Wisconsin Initiative. Founded by a group of scholars and nonpartisan practitioners that released Wisconsin's inaugural civic health report in 2020, the Initiative develops and supports programs and activities that advance civic health across Wisconsin. Since its founding, the Initiative has collaborated with national organizations that support access to civic health data and networks, including, to name just a few, the National Conference on Citizenship, AmeriCorps, and Better Together America. The Initiative will host its biennial CommUnity Conference on Civic Health on April 27, with sites across Wisconsin. All are welcome.

Strengthening civic health is a critical, ongoing, shared effort that belongs to — and requires — all of us. ■

*Mary Beth Collins is the executive director of the Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies, which conducts community-engaged teaching, research, and outreach focused on the nonprofit sector, civil society, and community efforts, at UW-Madison. Collins holds a dual Juris Doctor and Master of Arts degree in Latin American, Caribbean and Iberian studies from UW-Madison. She is the co-author of the inaugural and second Civic Health of Wisconsin reports.*

## EMBRACING CHALLENGE. DELIVERING OPPORTUNITY.

THE ATTOLLES LAW TEAM  
IS FOCUSED ON SERVING WISCONSIN  
COUNTIES AND OTHER PUBLIC ENTITIES.

Contact us to learn how we can  
partner with you to achieve the  
unique goals of Wisconsin counties.

**ATTOLLES**  
LAW, s.c.

Andy Phillips  
Attorney and WCA General Counsel  
[aphillips@attolles.com](mailto:aphillips@attolles.com) | 414-644-0391

[www.attolles.com](http://www.attolles.com)



# Committed to empowering your health.

The WCA Group Health Trust is a trusted resource for assisting Wisconsin counties, municipalities, and school districts in fulfilling their employee health benefit obligations in a fiscally responsible manner.

**GHT**

WCA Group Health Trust

*Your Partner in Health*

To learn more about the WCA Group Health Trust, visit

[www.wcaght.org](http://www.wcaght.org)   @wcaght



# Wisconsin's BEAD Program Final Proposal Approved

*By Summer Strand, Chairperson, Public Service Commission*

On Dec. 2, 2025, Gov. Tony Evers and the Public Service



**Public Service Commission  
of WISCONSIN**

Commission announced federal government approval of Wisconsin's final proposal for the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment program. This milestone unlocks over \$1 billion in federal investments from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to expand access to high-speed internet to more than 175,000 Wisconsin homes and businesses.

Throughout the planning and development of Wisconsin's BEAD program, the Evers administration undertook robust outreach and engagement efforts with a variety of stakeholders, including county leaders and local officials. These stakeholders provided essential perspectives, ideas, and feedback that helped inform and craft Wisconsin's BEAD program.

From August 2024 to May 2025, the PSC conducted two BEAD program grant rounds, which resulted

in nearly all BEAD-eligible locations statewide receiving an application to deploy

fiber to their premises. However, in June 2025, the Trump administration ordered states to rescind their preliminary awards and implement significant regressive changes to their BEAD programs. Failure to comply with this new federal directive could have resulted in Wisconsin losing historic levels of federal broadband funding. As such, the

PSC had 90 days to revise Wisconsin's BEAD program to align with the new requirements, redo the BEAD grant round, and develop the final proposal.

The awards approved in the final proposal will provide funding to serve all BEAD-eligible locations throughout the state and include the support of more than \$397 million in matching funds. The proportion of technologies represented in these awards is 76% fiber, 14% satellite, and 10% fixed wireless. Now that Wisconsin's final proposal was approved, infrastructure







## MARATHON COUNTY

# Sparking STEM Wonder The Children's Imaginarium

In downtown Wausau, the thriving Children's Imaginarium is a cornerstone of community growth. Part of the revitalization of an area where a shopping mall once stood, it is a place for children to learn, parents to engage, and communities to connect.

More than a children's museum, the Imaginarium encourages and celebrates curiosity. The exhibits are rooted in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), but the experience doesn't feel like an academic assignment. Instead, the learning unfolds naturally through play. Each activity is carefully designed for young children to engage with complex concepts in intuitive, fun and age-appropriate ways.

The Imaginarium's corporate partners are integral to its mission to expose our youngest learners to STEM-based fields. The contractors building the Imaginarium provided input on the design of a construction exhibit that encourages children to build and play. The Marathon Cheese Corporation sponsors a Farm to Fork Market Gallery; Greenheck, a global leader in air movement products, sponsors a wind-powered exhibit;



By Michelle Gormican Thompson, WCA Communications

and CTech Manufacturing provided the custom cabinetry for a STEM lab gallery.

At its core, the Imaginarium is built on the belief that learning is most powerful when it is shared, encouraging parents and children to

explore together. It is now part of the vibrancy of the Wausau community — a visual investment in families that is factored into the equation of recruiting and retaining residents and drawing tourists. Since the Imaginarium opened in December 2023, more than 60,000 visitors from over 150 zip codes have explored its exhibits.

“By reimagining the former mall site, the community has created a destination that draws families, supports local growth, and reinforces the idea that children are central to the region's future,” said WCA President & CEO Mark D. O'Connell. “It stands as a powerful example of how thoughtful development can strengthen community identity while meeting real needs within a county.” □

► **WATCH NOW:** [discoverwisconsin.com/dw-uniquely-wisconsin](https://discoverwisconsin.com/dw-uniquely-wisconsin)



## WASHINGTON COUNTY

# The Historic Heartbeat of Hartford Chandelier Ballroom

**The Chandelier Ballroom in Hartford** has weathered the Great Depression, recessions, wars, and even a COVID pandemic.

Built in 1928 by local brewing magnate Joseph Schwartz Jr., it was designed by Milwaukee architect Robert A. Messmer as a massive octagonal dance hall. It quickly became one of the region's most celebrated entertainment spots, drawing big-name jazz and swing bands and even national radio broadcasts in the 1930s.

But like many historic spaces, the ballroom's story took unexpected turns. In 1944, as World War II stretched American manpower thin and domestic labor shortages grew acute, the federal government leased the ballroom and its surrounding parkland for wartime use. The great dance hall was transformed into Camp Hartford, where hundreds of German prisoners of war were held.

It was an unlikely chapter that added depth and

complexity to the Chandelier Ballroom's legacy. Even during times of uncertainty, the structure endured, adapting to the needs of the moment while remaining woven into the fabric of Hartford life.

Through each decade, the ballroom evolved with the community around it. Today, owned by the Hartford Historic Preservation Foundation, the Chandelier Ballroom remains an integral part of the community. From weddings and celebrations to performances and special events, the space brings people together just as it has for nearly a century.

"The Chandelier Ballroom's history is incredible and stands today as a testament to the people of Washington County," said Mark C. Rose, President & CEO of Discover Mediaworks, Inc. "These are values at the heart of Wisconsin and the connections that bring our lives together." □

► **WATCH NOW:** [discoverwisconsin.com/dw-uniquely-wisconsin](https://discoverwisconsin.com/dw-uniquely-wisconsin)

Current counties sharing their Uniquely Wisconsin stories in season four include Brown, Marathon, Outagamie, Pierce and Washington. Counties highlighted in the first three seasons of Uniquely Wisconsin include Adams, Ashland, Calumet, Green Lake, Jefferson, Kenosha, Lincoln, Marathon, Monroe, Oconto, Portage, Price, Racine, Rock, Sauk, Sheboygan, Washington and Wood.

To see season four stories, as well as previous seasons, visit Discover Wisconsin's YouTube page at [youtube.com/DiscoverWI](https://youtube.com/DiscoverWI) and scroll down to the "Uniquely Wisconsin" section. You can also listen to "The Cabin" podcast on your favorite podcast player, where counties in the program are featured. To learn more and join the Emmy Award-winning Uniquely Wisconsin brand, contact WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell or WCA Communications Consultant Michelle Gormican Thompson at 866-404-2700.

# Transportation Delivers FOR WISCONSIN

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

Transportation isn't just about getting from point A to point B. It is a vital component of Wisconsin's daily life and economic prosperity. Roads, rails, air, and water form a network that powers our state's economy, connecting farmers to markets, factories to buyers, and communities to opportunities.

But if one link weakens due to a lack of stable funding, the consequences affect everyone: higher prices, longer commutes, job losses, and less safe ways to get where we need to go.

When we invest, transportation delivers for Wisconsin.

## ► Recent investments are making a difference

In recent budgets, Wisconsin has secured substantial transportation investments, including some new, ongoing revenue, that are producing tangible benefits.

Additional funding for the Agricultural Roads Improvement Program (ARIP) and the Local Roads Improvement Program-Supplemental (LRIP-S) is bolstering critical rural and community infrastructure that supports agriculture and local economies. Investments in the State Highway Improvement



## TRANSPORTATION DELIVERS

Program are keeping significant projects like I-41 and I-94 East-West on track, while inflationary adjustments to transportation aids are helping to mitigate the sharp rise in construction costs seen in recent years.

These programs and projects demonstrate the power of strategic investment. However, the long-term stability of Wisconsin's transportation

revenue remains at risk.

## ► Traditional user fees falling behind

Wisconsin's core transportation user fees, primarily the gas tax and vehicle registration fees, have failed to keep pace with inflation or the growing demands on the transportation system. Since the state repealed gas tax indexing in 2005 (with the final adjustment occurring in 2006), neither major user fee has an automatic growth mechanism. Unlike percentage-based General Fund taxes, which increase with rising incomes, prices, and economic activity, these per-gallon or per-vehicle fees remain flat unless changed by legislative action. Any growth depends on higher vehicle counts or additional miles driven, which, in turn, accelerates wear and tear on the system.

## Turnout for Transportation Roundtables in May

Join us for breakfast and an engaging roundtable discussion on Wisconsin's transportation future.

Hear directly from local officials, community leaders, and industry partners about recent infrastructure accomplishments, emerging opportunities, and their real-world impacts on our neighborhoods, businesses, and the state's economy.

Together, we'll reflect on the progress we've made and the challenges still ahead as we work to preserve a safe, modern,

and interconnected transportation system that keeps Wisconsin moving forward, strong, and competitive.

Candidates and legislators will be in attendance.

Your voice and perspective matter. We hope you'll join the conversation. For dates and locations, and to RSVP, visit [TDAwisconsin.org](http://TDAwisconsin.org).



As a result, transportation funding has increasingly relied on federal aid and recurring and one-time transfers from the state's general fund. While a diverse mix of revenue sources can strengthen the transportation fund, this approach also introduces uncertainty. Key concerns include the size, structure, and timing of the next federal surface transportation reauthorization bill, as well as a shrinking general fund surplus amid potential economic headwinds.

Infrastructure projects require long planning horizons, which often span years or decades. That reality makes predictable, reliable revenue essential.

### ► **Structural challenges ahead**

Wisconsin faces a projected transportation shortfall exceeding \$1 billion heading into the 2027-29 biennial budget cycle.

Several factors contribute to this challenge. We need to replace \$580 million in one-time general fund support in the current budget (an increase from \$556 million in 2023-25), which helped sustain the popular ARIP and LRIP-S programs. Wisconsin's 60-year-old interstate highways are reaching the end of their useful life, requiring a significant, generational investment in the pipeline for their reconstruction. At the same time, persistent cost pressures continue to erode the purchasing power of existing programs.

Without new, sustainable revenue solutions, critical projects may be delayed or cancelled, threatening safety improvements, economic competitiveness, and quality of life statewide.

### ► **Investing in Wisconsin's future**

Transportation delivers jobs, economic growth, community connections, safety, and opportunity.

This reality is driving a multi-year campaign launched in 2025 by the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Counties Association, and key partners. The Transportation Delivers campaign focuses on educating policymakers and the public about transportation's indispensable role in everyday life and the real costs of neglecting our aging infrastructure.

The campaign incorporates paid media, including

## Adopt a "Transportation Delivers" Resolution by April 30

The WCA encourages every county to pass a resolution supporting sustainable transportation funding by April 30.

To assist counties, the WCA created a model resolution. It does not advocate a specific revenue source. Instead, it calls on state leaders to identify and commit to a stable, long-term solution that provides predictability for counties and municipalities.

Visit [wicounties.org](http://wicounties.org) for more information or contact WCA Government Affairs Associate Collin Driscoll at [driscoll@wicounties.org](mailto:driscoll@wicounties.org).



### JOIN THE CAMPAIGN

Visit [transportationdelivers.com](http://transportationdelivers.com) to learn more.

compelling video spots and messaging (view at [transportationdelivers.com](http://transportationdelivers.com)); grassroots engagement with local leaders, stakeholders and community voices; and direct advocacy to build broad, bipartisan support across Wisconsin.

Beginning in January 2026, local governments across the state started adopting resolutions calling for long-term, sustainable transportation funding. These local actions are

helping to build momentum ahead of the TDA's regional candidate and legislator forums in May.

Together, these efforts reinforce a simple truth: when transportation works, Wisconsin works.

### ► **Moving forward**

Wisconsin's transportation system has long been a driver of prosperity — supporting agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, logistics, and local commerce.

Recent budget successes show what focused investment can achieve. But addressing the structural weaknesses in transportation funding is essential to ensure the system remains reliable, modern, and prepared for the future.

With stable, economy-aligned revenue, transportation will continue to deliver for Wisconsin, today and for generations to come. ■

*Debby Jackson is the executive director of the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin, a statewide alliance of 400-plus stakeholders committed to advancing the best in transportation.*



Save the dates for upcoming webinars:

- April 22
- May 27
- June 24
- July 22
- August 26
- October 28
- November 18
- December 16

## March “In the Board Room” Webinar: Removing Elected Officials from Office

Join us for the March 25 session of “In the Board Room” with Andy Phillips and Attolles Law for a legal and practical overview of the statutory process for removing a county official from office.

In rare circumstances, counties may consider removing an elected official from office to address serious concerns about conduct or performance. While the statutes provide a mechanism to remove a county official from office, the process is neither simple nor easy to implement. In addition

to answering your questions, the Attolles team will address the many misconceptions about the process that, hopefully, you never need to use.

The March webinar will be held on Wednesday, March 25 at noon. Visit [bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom26](http://bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom26) to register for the 2026 webinars. There is no cost to register.

Recordings of all webinars are available on the WCA website at [wicounties.org](http://wicounties.org). ■

## GHT/COUNTY MUTUAL 2026

### SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Applications are being accepted until May 15 for scholarships to a Wisconsin college or university from the WCA Group Health Trust and the Wisconsin County Mutual Insurance Corporation.

Visit [wcaght.org](http://wcaght.org) and [wisconsincountymutual.org](http://wisconsincountymutual.org) for details.

## National County Government Month in April

### Start planning your activities for National County Government

Month in April. To help counties plan for this year’s annual celebration of county government, the National Association of Counties has released an updated toolkit, featuring outreach strategies and local activity ideas.

Visit [bit.ly/CtyGovtMonth](http://bit.ly/CtyGovtMonth) to explore NACo’s toolkit for ideas to help your county participate.



## Prime Exclusive Offer for WCA Members

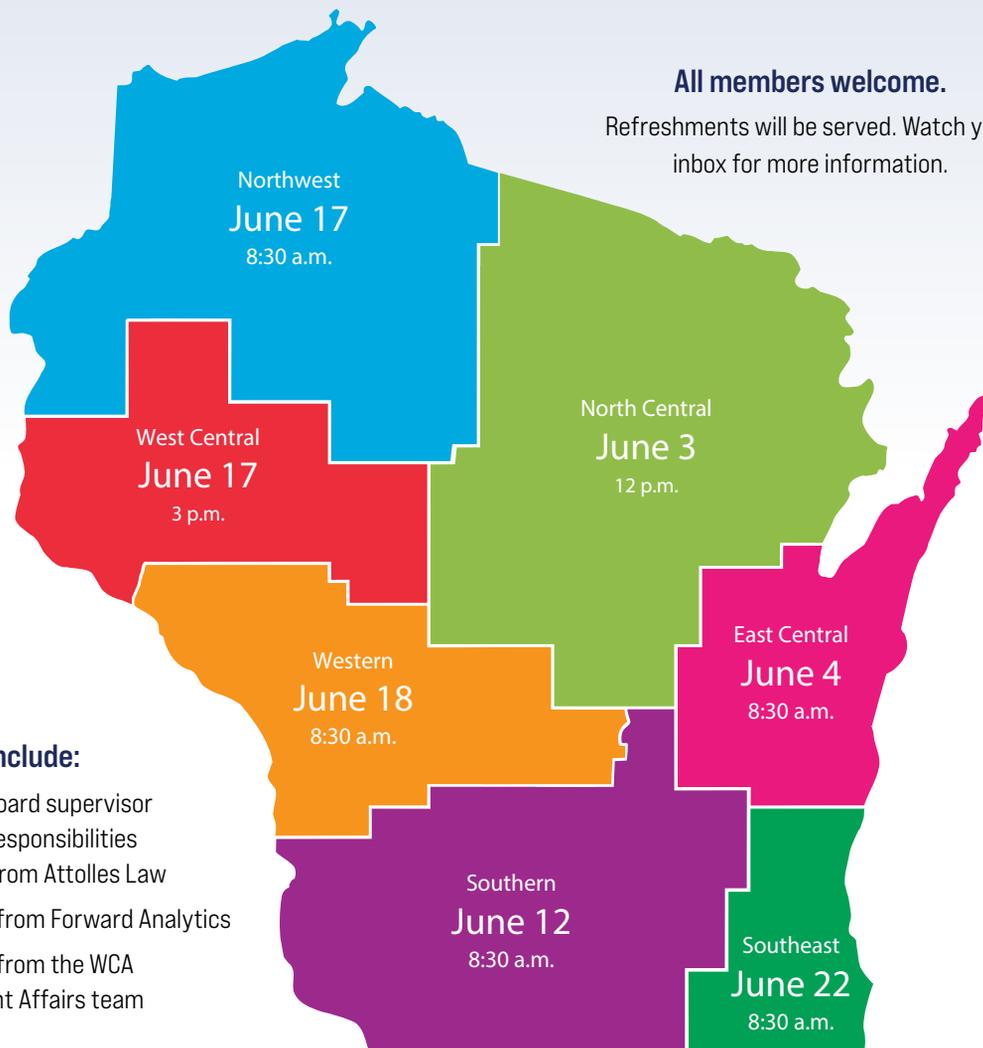
The WCA has partnered with Amazon Business for a new, exclusive program. WCA member counties and their departments are now eligible to sign up for a free Amazon Business Prime membership that includes free and fast shipping, a pre-approved line of credit, and a 25% discount on select office, maintenance,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

Contact the WCA for more information.



# WCA 2026 DISTRICT MEETINGS

Save the dates! Locations to be announced.



**All members welcome.**  
Refreshments will be served. Watch your inbox for more information.

### Highlights include:

- A county board supervisor roles and responsibilities refresher from Attolles Law
- An update from Forward Analytics
- An update from the WCA Government Affairs team

### 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.

Wisconsin Counties Association

# 2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

September 20-22, 2026



**Kalahari Resorts & Conventions**  
1305 Kalahari Drive  
Wisconsin Dells, WI 53965

## WCA 88th Annual Conference

SEPT. 20-22, 2026 Wisconsin Dells  
Kalahari Resort and Convention Center

### ▶ SUBMIT YOUR IDEAS

Planning is underway for the 2026 WCA Annual Conference. The WCA wants ideas from its members on potential topics and speakers for the concurrent workshops and general sessions. To submit your ideas, visit [bit.ly/2026WCA\\_Ideas](http://bit.ly/2026WCA_Ideas) by March 31.

### ▶ SHOWCASE YOUR COUNTY: Apply to Co-Host

The WCA invites counties to step into the spotlight by applying to be a co-host of the 2026 WCA Annual Conference. This opportunity allows counties to showcase what makes their community unique to peers from across the state.

Co-hosts receive a complimentary exhibit booth in the conference exhibit hall on Monday, Sept. 21, to highlight signature programs, attractions, and innovations. They also receive recognition throughout the conference and a dedicated spotlight in the conference program and the September issue of Wisconsin Counties.

Counties interested in joining as a 2026 co-host with Sauk County should email Amy Dias at [dias@wicounties.org](mailto:dias@wicounties.org) by March 27 with a short paragraph sharing their interest and what they would like to showcase.

NEW & USED CONSTRUCTION EQUIPMENT PARTS

# THILL TRACK & TRACTOR SERVICE, INC.

**FULL-SERVICE UNDERCARRIAGE SERVICE & REPAIR SHOP**

ph: (715) 832-2128 | fax (715) 832-2687 | W5010 State Rd 85 South | Eau Claire, WI 54701-9534

[ThillTractor.com](http://ThillTractor.com) | [parts@thilltractor.com](mailto:parts@thilltractor.com)



# PTMA

FINANCIAL SOLUTIONS

## Helping Wisconsin communities thrive.

It all adds up to good.

- Municipal Advisory Services
- Cash Flow Management
- Bond Proceeds Management
- Short, Mid & Long Term Investments
- Investment Safekeeping
- Separately Managed Accounts

Proudly Serving



Michele Wiberg  
Senior Vice  
President, Sales



Erik Kass  
Director,  
Public Finance



Charlie Verbos  
Director,  
Public Finance



Brett Weeden  
Vice President,  
Investment Services



Josh Barbian  
Associate Vice  
President,  
Investment Services



Matt Silkey  
Associate Vice  
President,  
Investment Services



Haley Treba  
Assoc. Relationship  
Manager  
Investment Services



Jaycee Gundert  
Assoc. Relationship  
Manager  
Investment Services



Max Saron  
Assoc. Relationship  
Manager  
Investment Services

414.225.0099 | [PTMA.COM](http://PTMA.COM) | [INVESTWISC.COM](http://INVESTWISC.COM)

©2025 PTMA Financial Solutions. All rights reserved.

## Most Federal Fiscal Year Funding Approved; DHS Funding Dispute Continues

As of this writing, most federal funding has been approved through Sept. 30, 2026, the end of this federal fiscal year. The exception is funding for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which was only approved for funding through Feb. 13, to give legislators an opportunity to reach an agreement on immigration enforcement policies.

Two federal fiscal year 2026 appropriation packages were signed into law in January and February. According to the National Association of Counties, in addition to funding, the packages included policies important to counties. Among other provisions, the legislation:

- Eliminates scheduled Medicaid Disproportionate Share Hospital cuts
- Extends enhanced supplemental payments for county hospitals
- Prohibits the closure of Farm Service Agency county offices
- Extends programs authorized under the 2018 Farm Bill
- Reauthorizes mandatory funding for key local health safety net programs, including community health centers
- Reaffirms the statutory requirement for a Low-Cost Broadband Service Option as a condition of receiving BEAD funding, consistent with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law
- Increases the allowable share of Safe Streets and Roads for All grant funding to be used for capital projects from 60% to 70% ■

**BALESTRIERI™**  
EST. 1992

**ENVIRONMENTAL  
CONSTRUCTION  
MANAGEMENT**

- ▶ PRELIMINARY ENVIRONMENTAL INSPECTIONS
- ▶ ASBESTOS ABATEMENT
- ▶ INDUSTRIAL COATINGS IMPACTED WITH LEAD
- ▶ MASS DEMOLITION/ EXCAVATION/ EARTHWORK
- ▶ MOLD REMEDIATION
- ▶ MEDIA AND/OR CHEMICAL CLEANING
- ▶ SELECTIVE INTERIOR DEMOLITION
- ▶ UNIVERSAL HAZARDOUS WASTE REMOVAL
- ▶ INDUSTRIAL CLEANING

www.balestrierigroup.com | 262.743.2800

## HHS Repeals Federal Nursing Home Staffing Mandate

On Dec. 2, 2025, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services published an interim final rule that repealed a proposed federal nursing home staffing mandate that would have required long-term care facilities to meet strict minimum staffing levels.

According to the National Association of Counties, the 2023 rule had drawn strong opposition from counties nationwide, particularly those that operate skilled nursing facilities or serve rural communities already grappling with severe workforce shortages. Proponents had argued that the rule was necessary to improve patient safety and care. ■

# President Signs Executive Order on State AI Lawmaking; Wisconsin Responds

On Dec. 11, 2025, President Donald Trump signed an executive order aimed at mobilizing federal agencies to challenge existing state laws on artificial intelligence, clarify the legal scope for regulating AI models at the state level, and condition federal funding on the non-enforcement of select state AI laws. The order also directs presidential advisors to prepare a legislative recommendation for Congress on a uniform federal policy framework for AI that preempts state AI laws deemed to conflict with this order.

In response, Gov. Tony Evers sent a letter to Trump urging him to “abandon any efforts to preempt, punish, or undermine states, including Wisconsin, that have worked

to enact reasonable, common sense policies relating to artificial intelligence.” Evers pointed to laws passed by the GOP-led Legislature that are intended to provide “safeguards for problematic uses of AI,” such as making it a felony to share “deepfaked” nude images without the subject’s consent.

As reported by Wisconsin Public Radio, a legislative study committee published a report last year exploring how to regulate AI at the state level. It called for highly targeted AI regulation, avoiding “the potential overreach” of comprehensive AI legislation, and expanded education and workforce training about effectively using AI. ■

## United States Exits World Health Organization

In January, the United States formally exited the World Health Organization. According to the White House, “This decision was driven by profound failures in the WHO’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic originating in Wuhan, China; its persistent refusal to implement necessary reforms; and its lack of accountability, transparency, and independence.”

The United States was a founding member of WHO in 1948 and its top contributor, providing nearly \$1.3 billion during the 2022-23 biennium. The White House says that “the United States will continue to lead global health efforts independently — engaging partners directly, deploying resources efficiently, and ensuring accountability to the American people outside of WHO structures.” However, it is not yet known how the current administration intends to do that.

Scientists, researchers, and technical experts in the United States are expected to continue interacting with WHO on an individual basis, but their roles and access to WHO data remain uncertain.

With the United States no longer having a seat at the table to influence WHO’s global health decisions, other countries will have a greater opportunity to set priorities and guide policy. In addition, the loss of funding for WHO will make it more difficult for the organization to address public health threats, with likely long-term, global implications.

According to the Better World Campaign, among other benefits to Wisconsin, the WHO and the World Organization for Animal Health are combatting avian influenza and helping to protect Wisconsin’s nearly 6,000 farms that contribute to the state’s \$784 million poultry industry. In addition, the WHO and United Nations agencies bought more than \$1 million in goods and services from Wisconsin companies in 2023.

In response to the White House’s decision, California became the first U.S. state to independently join the WHO’s Global Outbreak Alert & Response Network. It is not yet known if other states will follow suit. ■



LEGAL ISSUES  
RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

# Corporation Counsel: Attorney for the Entire County

*By Andy Phillips and Thomas Cameron, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.*

In the theme song for a classic 1984 movie, a question is posed: “When there’s something strange in your neighborhood, who you gonna call?” The answer, of course — “Ghostbusters!” — left little doubt as to what the responding team of paranormal investigators would do.

County government also has a “Who you gonna call?” position — but the title is far less self-explanatory or catchy for a theme song. Established in Section 59.42 of the Wisconsin Statutes, that role is the corporation counsel, the lawyer representing the county in non-criminal matters.<sup>1</sup>

This article provides an overview of the corporation counsel position, including what the corporation counsel does, for whom the corporation counsel does it, and how the county can obtain additional legal support to accomplish the county’s goals and objectives.

## ► What does the corporation counsel do?

A corporation counsel’s duties are limited to civil matters.<sup>2</sup> In handling all civil legal matters for the county, a corporation counsel may give “legal opinions to the board and its committees” and interpret “the powers and duties of the board and county offices.”<sup>3</sup>

In practice, this means the corporation counsel has an exceptionally broad portfolio of responsibilities. For example, the corporation counsel is responsible for the prosecution of mental health commitments and the establishment of guardianships and protective placements. The corporation counsel is also responsible for representing the county in other civil litigation, which can

include tax foreclosures and bankruptcies.

Outside the courtroom, corporation counsel provides legal advice to the county board and the departments of the county. This may include drafting resolutions and ordinances, preparing documents for acquiring or selling real estate, negotiating contracts, and assisting in the resolution of employment matters. It is often said that there is no such thing as a “typical” day in the corporation counsel’s office.

## ► For whom does the corporation counsel provide legal services?

The corporation counsel provides legal services for the entire county.<sup>4</sup> While this answer may appear straightforward at first, it can become more complicated in practice.

In the context of representing an entity, the American Bar Association notes: “An organizational client is a legal entity, but it cannot act except through its officers, directors, employees, shareholders and other constituents.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, while the county may be responsible for plowing snow on a particular highway, it is not the county that plows the highway. People do that work. Without people, the county couldn’t do anything. However, that does not mean that the people allowing the county to accomplish its goals and objectives are, themselves, the corporation counsel’s clients.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, while the corporation counsel represents the entire county, the corporation counsel **does not** represent the individual residents of the county. Put another way, a resident cannot obtain legal advice from the

## The corporation counsel provides legal services for the entire county.

While this answer may appear straightforward at first,  
it can become more complicated in practice.

corporation counsel about their personal legal situation.

Understanding the corporation counsel's role as the attorney for the entire county is helpful to understanding the relevant ethical rules regarding confidentiality and conflicts of interest that govern a corporation counsel's conduct.

### ► The corporation counsel's duty of confidentiality

The idea that an attorney must keep certain information confidential is well known. In Wisconsin, the applicable ethical rule provides:

A lawyer shall not reveal information relating to the representation of a client unless the client gives informed consent, except for disclosures that are impliedly authorized in order to carry out the representation.<sup>7</sup> However, a lawyer shall reveal information relating to the representation of a client to the extent the lawyer reasonably believes necessary to prevent the client from committing a criminal or fraudulent act that the lawyer reasonably believes is likely to result in death or substantial bodily harm or in substantial injury to the financial interest or property of another.<sup>8</sup>

If, for example, a county administrator asked corporation counsel to investigate allegations of wrongdoing, interviews conducted by the corporation counsel with the county's officers and employees would be confidential under this rule.<sup>9</sup> This same confidentiality provision would prohibit the corporation counsel from sharing with one employee the contents of another employee's interview about the alleged wrongdoing, unless sharing particular information was necessary to conduct the investigation.

While the corporation counsel represents the entire county, not every county officer or employee needs to know every fact the corporation counsel learns in providing legal

services to the county. At the same time, the corporation counsel could learn information during the course of their representation of the county that must be shared more broadly within the organization.

### ► Navigating conflict within the county

When providing legal services for the entire county, there will, of course, be situations in which one part of the county disagrees with another part of the county. For example, an elected constitutional officer, such as the sheriff, might disagree with the county board's proposed budget or a county board supervisor might disagree vehemently with another county board supervisor on a piece of legislation. Depending on the nature of the disagreement, the corporation counsel may have a conflict of interest.

As a legal matter, the corporation counsel has a conflict of interest if their representation of one client would be **directly adverse** to another client or there is a significant risk that the representation of one client will be materially limited by the lawyer's responsibilities to another client.<sup>10</sup> There are, however, situations in which the corporation counsel may still represent a client when there is a conflict of interest.<sup>11</sup>

In general, unless the county is engaged in active litigation against itself, the corporation counsel may represent both disagreeing elements.<sup>12</sup> While it may be ethically permissible, depending on the facts and circumstances of the disagreement, there can be practical limitations on representing "both sides" of an intra-county disagreement. Thankfully, the statutes recognize this difficult position in which corporation counsel may find themselves and provide an avenue for relief.

### ► Can the corporation counsel get help?

While the corporation counsel has a broad portfolio of responsibilities, they are not on their own. First, the county

*Continued on page 46*



## LEGAL ISSUES

Continued from page 45

board may authorize one or more additional attorney positions within the office of the corporation counsel to assist the corporation counsel.<sup>13</sup> Second, the county board may authorize hiring outside legal counsel “as the need arises.”<sup>14</sup>

While the corporation counsel can certainly be involved in discussions about how best to provide appropriate legal services for the county, the decision — including whether “the need arises” for outside legal counsel — ultimately rests with the county board. The attorney general has concluded that Wis. Stat. § 59.42(3) gives the county board the authority to authorize and approve contracts with outside legal counsel.<sup>15</sup>

There are a number of reasons a county board may decide to hire outside legal counsel to provide some legal services for the county, including bandwidth, expertise, the instructions of the county’s insurance company, and situations in which one part of the county is suing another part of the county.

### ► Conclusion

This article is only an overview of the corporation counsel position. Counties are encouraged to work with their corporation counsel to better understand both the legal and practical limitations on what activities they may undertake and for whom. Ultimately, corporation counsel must elevate the interests of their client — the county — above other interests. Determining how best to accomplish this is not always a simple task.

If you have any questions surrounding this article, please do not hesitate to contact the WCA or the authors. ■

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

1. Criminal matters are the responsibility of the district attorney. See Wis. Stat. § 978.05(1).
2. Wis. Stat. § 59.42(1)(c), (2)(b).
3. The Milwaukee County corporation counsel also has the responsibility to review and sign “all contracts [involving Milwaukee County] to verify that the contracts comply with all statutes, rules, ordinances, and the county’s ethics policy.” Wis. Stat. § 59.42(2)(b)5.
4. In addition to representing the county as an entity, the corporation counsel represents the county board and any commissions, departments, committees, agencies, and officers of the county.
5. S.C.R. 20:1.13 (ABA Comment 1).
6. S.C.R. 20:1.13 (ABA Comment 2).
7. S.C.R. 20:1.6(a).
8. S.C.R. 20:1.6(b).
9. S.C.R. 20:1.13 (ABA Comment 2). To be clear, the county can waive this confidentiality. As a result, it would be possible for the facts gathered in the interviews with the corporation counsel to ultimately be made public.
10. S.C.R. 20:1.7(a).
11. S.C.R. 20:1.7(b). Even if there is a conflict of interest, “a lawyer may represent a client if: (1) the lawyer reasonably believes that the lawyer will be able to provide competent and diligent representation to each affected client; (2) the representation is not prohibited by law; (3) the representation does not involve the assertion of a claim by one client against another client represented by the lawyer in the same litigation or other proceeding before a tribunal; and (4) each affected client gives informed consent, confirmed in a writing signed by the client.”
12. “[L]awyers under the supervision of [elected] officers [such as corporation counsel] may be authorized to represent several government agencies in intragovernmental legal controversies in circumstances where a private lawyer could not represent multiple private clients.” S.C.R. 20 Preamble: A Lawyer’s Responsibilities (18).
13. Wis. Stat. § 59.42(1)(c), (2)(a).
14. Wis. Stat. § 59.42(3); OAG-01-13 (April 9, 2013).
15. OAG-01-13 (April 9, 2013).

**We Guide So You Can Lead**

Financial Advisory | Consulting | Alternative Finance  
Specialized Services | Structured Products Group  
Financial Modeling Powered by Synario™

For more information about PFM’s entities and services please go to [pfm.com/disclosures](http://pfm.com/disclosures).

# Protecting Communities. Insuring Confidence.



- GENERAL LIABILITY • CYBER LIABILITY • AUTOMOBILE LIABILITY
- PUBLIC OFFICIALS ERRORS & OMISSIONS • WORKERS' COMPENSATION • PROPERTY

## VALUE-ADDED SERVICES

Claims & Litigation Management | Underwriting  
Broad-Range Risk Management & Loss Control Services, including On-Site Training  
Online Safety Training through our Proprietary Coursework Database  
Community Insurance Care Line, 24/7 Nurse Triage Service for Work-Related Injuries

To learn more, contact  
Karen Flynn, Charles Taylor  
[Karen.flynn@charlestaylor.com](mailto:Karen.flynn@charlestaylor.com)

**community**  
INSURANCE

[www.communityinsurancecorporation.com](http://www.communityinsurancecorporation.com)

WISCONSIN  
Counties

22 E. Mifflin St., Ste. 900  
Madison, WI 53703

# The power of coming together.

## WCA CORPORATE PARTNERS



**MOTOROLA**



**WIPFLI**

