

WISCONSIN Counties

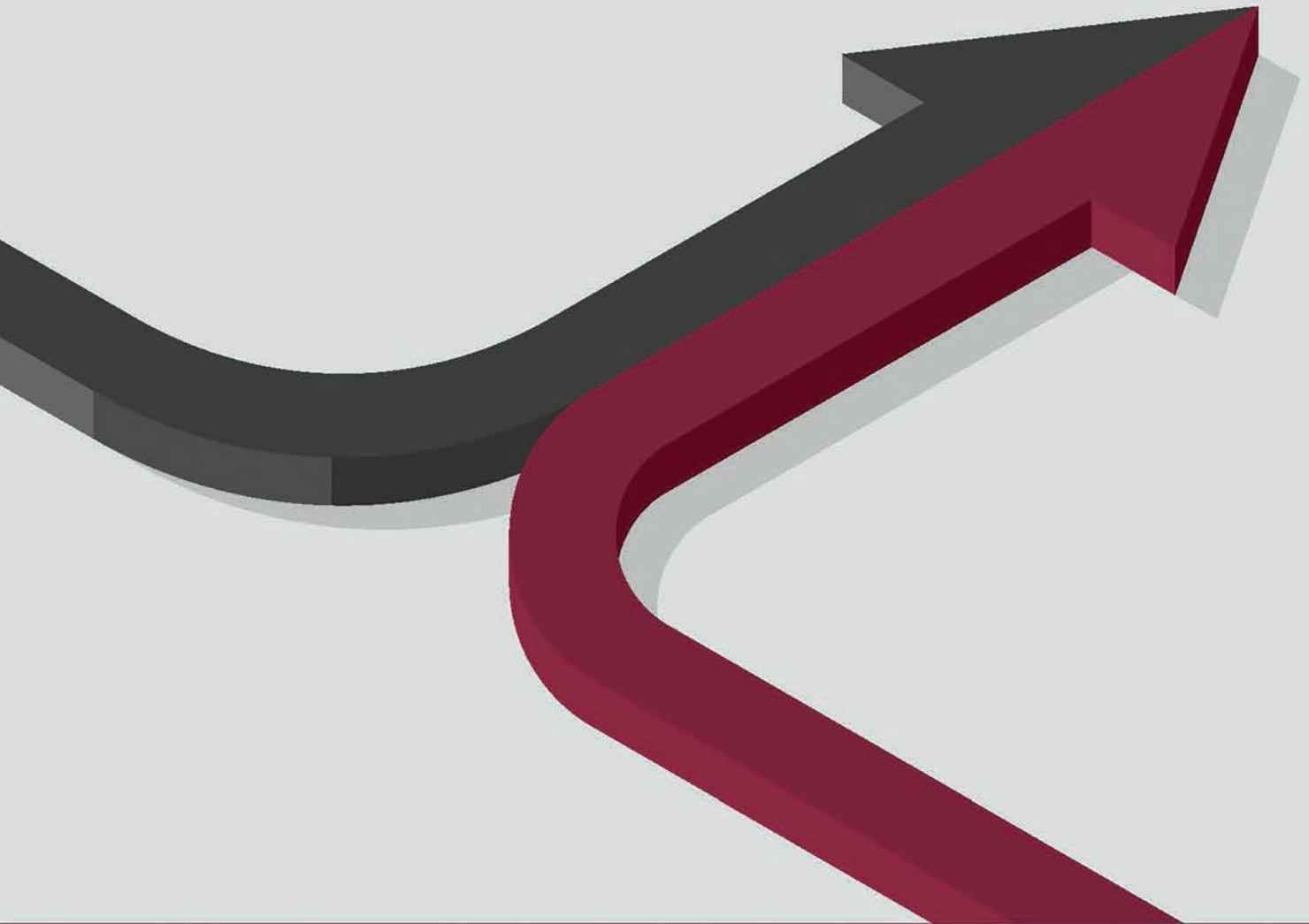
JULY 2026

WISCONSIN'S Historical Gems

County-supported museums and historic sites
connect residents and visitors with our rich past

*Close-up of the fence outlining
the Depression-era Wegner
Grotto in Monroe County*

ALSO: WCA Annual Business Meeting | Levy Limits, Debt Levies and Debt Limits



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

JULY 2026 | Volume 90, Number 7



6 ON THE COVER

Wisconsin's Historical Gems

- County-Led History: Preserving Wisconsin's Stories
- Keeping History Alive: The La Crosse County Historic Sites Preservation Commission
- Stewards of History: Milwaukee County Historical Society
- More than a Museum: A Cornerstone of Monroe County's Cultural and Historical Landscape
- From Belles to Drums and Bugles: Telling the Story of Racine County
- Protecting an Archaeological Treasure in Sauk County: Man Mound Park
- Sheboygan County Museum: Bringing History to Life

4 FROM THE PRESIDENT

Honoring the Past, Building the Future

25 'IT WAS FAIR, I WAS THERE'

Celebrate Juror Appreciation Month in September

26 CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

Designing Civic Health in Wisconsin

30 INTERGENERATIONAL CURRICULUM

Supporting the Youngest and Oldest Residents of Sheboygan County

34 UNIQUELY WISCONSIN

Looking Ahead to Season Five

36 ANNUAL CONFERENCE UPDATE

General information, keynote and concurrent workshop highlights

38 NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

2026 WCA Annual Business Meeting; Upcoming events; Forward Analytics Spotlight; Salute to Local Government Awards

42 FEDERAL UPDATE

FEMA Updates: New Transparency Law, Council Recommends Changes; Comment on New Grant Proposals

44 LEGAL ISSUES

Levy Limits, Debt Levies, and Debt Limits ... Oh My!



From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

President & CEO

Honoring the Past, Building the Future

This year, the United States marks a major milestone: the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Two and a half centuries have passed since our nation's founders put pen to paper and boldly declared that government derives its power from the people.

As we reflect on the ideals of liberty, justice and the rule of law that have guided our nation in our pursuit of a more perfect union, we are reminded that democracy cannot be taken for granted. It is something we need to work at every day.

When we think about our government, it is often debates in Congress or state legislation that first come to mind. Yet, the actual work of delivering services is frequently done by local governments.

In Wisconsin, counties administer elections, build roads and bridges, support public health, care for veterans, protect public safety, maintain parks and forests, and provide numerous other essential services. Their work directly touches people's lives every day and shapes the quality of life in all corners of the state.

As we celebrate our nation's momentous milestone, it is appropriate to look back and consider our past. This month's issue of Wisconsin Counties focuses on the work of counties and their partners to preserve and honor local history. But the anniversary also challenges us to look ahead and ask an important question: What kind of future are we building?

What will Wisconsin communities look like 25, 50 or even 100 years from now? How will the decisions that counties make today to address workforce shortages, public safety challenges and housing demands impact our future generations? Which institutions will we preserve, and where do we need to innovate?

No single office, agency or level of government holds all the answers. They will emerge from conversations across Wisconsin. They will come from leaders working together, learning from one another and finding practical solutions to shared challenges.

That is why opportunities to come together remain so important.

The WCA Annual Conference in September provides county leaders with a chance to step back and focus on the bigger picture: where we have been, where we are today and where we are headed. It is an opportunity to exchange ideas, challenge assumptions, share successes and learn from setbacks.

This year's conference theme centers on the 250th anniversary of American democracy and the role counties play in its success. To explore that theme, we have invited Dr. Peter Cressy, director of executive leadership programs at the Washington Leadership Institute and a 28-year veteran of the U.S. Navy, to deliver the keynote address. Drawing on lessons from George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, Dr. Cressy will examine eight leadership characteristics that remain essential during times of crisis, change and uncertainty.

We look forward to gathering in Sauk County on Sept. 20-22 to continue this important conversation and explore how strong leadership can help guide our counties and our state into the future. As Roosevelt famously observed, "There are many ways of going forward, but only one way of standing still."

On behalf of the association, thank you for your dedication, leadership and service to Wisconsin's counties as we go forward and help shape the next 250 years. ■



Wisconsin Counties Association

2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE



SEPTEMBER
20-22, 2026



Kalahari Resorts
& Conventions
Wisconsin Dells, WI

CELEBRATING 250 YEARS

HONORING THE PAST. BUILDING THE FUTURE.



Reflecting on our legacy.
Leading with purpose.

Preparing for the next 250 years
of strong and thriving counties

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

DR. PETER CRESSY



**Washington, Lincoln,
Roosevelt, Churchill:**
A Strategic Approach to
Leading in Times of Crisis
and Change

Explore the leadership lessons of four iconic
leaders who navigated crisis and change.
Discover eight timeless characteristics that
will strengthen your leadership today.



CONCURRENT WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS

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

- Emergency Management
- Renewable energy
- Roles and responsibilities
- County-run EMS
- Long-term care
- ADRC
- Transportation
- PFAS
- Working with the media
- Maximizing federal dollars

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



The "Glass Church" and other Depression-era decorated concrete sculptures are the highlight of the Wegner Grotto County Park in Monroe County. See page 16 to learn more.



County-Led History

PRESERVING WISCONSIN'S STORIES

By Christian Øverland, Ruth & Hartley Barker Director & CEO, Wisconsin Historical Society

With the nation celebrating the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence this year, stories from our founding era are in the spotlight. As we reflect on the moments that shaped our national identity and laid the groundwork for the future, this milestone also offers an opportunity to recognize the important work of local history organizations.

Across Wisconsin, county-supported museums, historic sites and local programs connect residents and visitors with the people, places and events that shaped the unique identity of communities, large and small. In doing so, they strengthen civic pride, support education and contribute to economic vitality and tourism across the state.

Local history captures the moments of everyday life — stories of industry, agriculture, immigration and cultural traditions — that might otherwise be lost. This place-based perspective offers invaluable insight into how communities have grown and adapted, preserving stories that will inspire new generations.

Our state has long been a national leader in recognizing the importance of local history. In 1898, Reuben Gold Thwaites, the second director of the Wisconsin Historical Society, launched the nation's first local history affiliate program to celebrate Wisconsin's 50th anniversary of statehood. More than a century later, the program remains a vital connection, linking more than 400 community-based organizations with the Wisconsin Historical Society's resources and expertise.

Thwaites captured the purpose of this work with a

simple guiding principle: "We aim to be useful." That spirit continues to define our affiliate program. Participating organizations receive support through consultations, workshops, a statewide conference, educational programming, technical assistance, and mini-grants. These resources are especially meaningful for smaller institutions, which often rely on



Christian Øverland

limited staff and dedicated volunteers yet play a critical role in preserving and sharing local stories that can have regional, state or even national impact.

At its core, preserving history is about strengthening communities by connecting their pathways from the past to the present and future. Local history fosters connections, deepens understanding and builds a shared sense of place.

I encourage county leaders to continue engaging with the Wisconsin Historical Society, a time-tested partner. By working together and investing in local history efforts, counties help ensure that communities' stories are preserved, shared and carried forward to inspire future generations to build a more perfect union. ■

Christian Øverland is the Ruth & Hartley Barker Director & CEO of the Wisconsin Historical Society. Created in 1846, the mission of the WHS is to preserve Wisconsin's and the nation's history. Its vast Wisconsin and North American collections are second only to the Library of Congress.

 **VISIT & LEARN MORE**
Visit WisconsinHistory.org to learn more about the affiliate program and find local societies, museums and sites.



The 1911 Waterloo Truss Bridge spans the La Crosse River near West Salem.

Keeping History Alive

THE LA CROSSE COUNTY HISTORIC SITES PRESERVATION COMMISSION

By Vicki Twinde-Javner, Chair, La Crosse County Historic Sites Preservation Commission

Stone bridges, century-old schools, historic homes and other longtime landmarks offer a window into La Crosse County’s past.

To ensure that the stories, structures and landscapes that shaped the region are not lost to time, the La Crosse County Historic Sites Preservation Commission works to identify, preserve, and promote historic and archaeological sites throughout the county’s townships.

Established in the early 1990s as a La Crosse County committee, the commission

was formed at the behest of community members in response to a growing number of nominations of local sites to the National Register of Historic Places. Since then, the commission has become an important part of the county’s cultural heritage, operating under its own subsection

of Chapter 22 in the county ordinances and with a dedicated budget in the county’s annual plan.

Notably, the commission is a Certified Local Government (CLG) participant and currently, the only countywide CLG in the state focused on historic preservation. Under the auspices of the National



The Wet Coulee Cemetery in the town of Farmington began in 1880 and is the final resting place of the county’s only Congressional Medal of Honor recipient.

Park Service and administered locally by the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office, the CLG program is intended to “facilitate state and local government cooperation with federal partners to promote nationwide preservation initiatives. Through the certification process, local communities make a commitment to national historic preservation standards.”

The La Crosse County Commission’s seven-member, all-volunteer team complies with federal and state CLG requirements and brings together a diverse range of expertise, including professionals in architecture, history and preservation, archaeology, and real estate, as well as a county board supervisor and community members.

The commission meets monthly. In keeping with CLG requirements, all meetings are open to the public and provide opportunities for community input.

Under the county ordinance, the commission can designate historic structures, sites and districts within its jurisdiction. In accordance with state requirements, it also maintains a publicly available list of locally recognized historic properties and educates the public through its website and outreach materials, including brochures, posters, and bookmarks placed in libraries and community spaces.

Through the CLG, the commission is eligible for annual grants from the Wisconsin Historical Society, which support a wide range of initiatives, including countywide historic surveys, preservation planning, and educational programs. The commission also reviews nominations to the National Register of Historic Places and responds to inquiries regarding federally funded projects that may affect historic resources.

To date, the commission has designated 36 local historic properties, including bridges, breweries, cemeteries, churches, township buildings, and private residences. Some properties in the city of La Crosse were designated before the city established its own preservation commission, underscoring the commission’s long-standing impact.

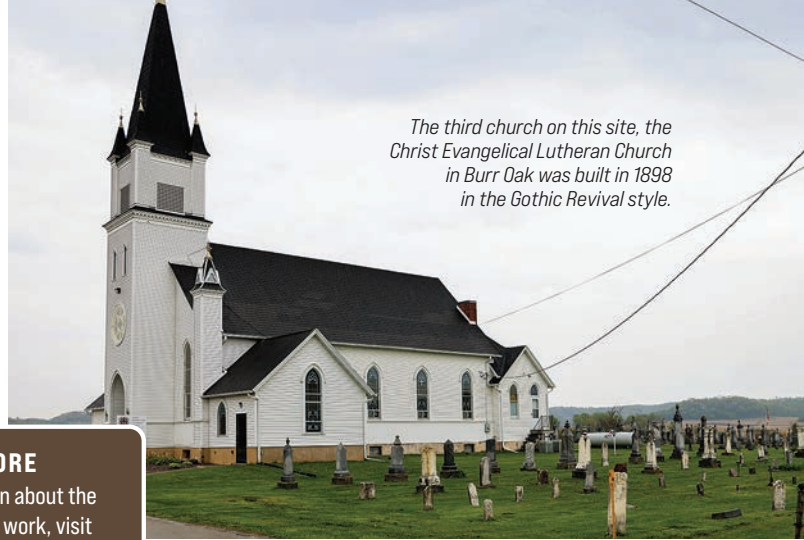
Through restoration projects, educational outreach and historic recognition, the commission plays an important role in ensuring that La Crosse County’s history remains visible, safeguarding the county’s heritage so future generations can experience and appreciate its stories. ■

Vicki Twinde-Javner is chair of the La Crosse County Historic Sites Preservation Commission and is an archaeologist with the Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center at UW-La Crosse.



LEARN MORE

For more information about the commission and its work, visit LaCrosseCounty.org/Historic-Sites.



The third church on this site, the Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Burr Oak was built in 1898 in the Gothic Revival style.



The Bank of Mindoro originally opened in 1916.

457(b) retirement plans



We're proud of our strong partnership

Nationwide® goes above and beyond to do the right thing at the right time for county employees and their families. Participants get better experiences, and the National Association of Counties (NACo) gets a better partner.

BETTER PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES
We help to optimize retirement readiness

ADMINISTRATIVE SIMPLICITY
Customized to your needs

VALUES THAT TRANSLATE INTO SERVICE
Nationwide is member owned



We have received the DALBAR Plan Participant Service Award each year since 2014.

For more information, contact:

Levi Lathen
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 nrforu.com.

Nationwide and the Nationwide N and Eagle are service marks of Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company. © 2022 Nationwide NRM-21962M3-NX (12/22)



The current home of the Milwaukee County Historical Society was originally a bank.



The first Milwaukee County Historical Society Museum was on the seventh floor of the county courthouse.



Stewards of History

MILWAUKEE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

By Ben Barbera, Executive Director, Milwaukee County Historical Society

In 1935, Milwaukee County Supervisor Frederic Heath had the foresight to recognize that preserving the past was essential to understanding the community's future. While the Milwaukee Pioneer Club, the Old Settlers' Club, and others focused on preserving the legacy of the county's earliest and most prominent residents, Heath was interested in a much broader history.

As a founder of the Socialist Party of the United States and a former journalist, alderman, and school board



Frederic Heath

member, Heath knew there were many more stories to tell. Thus began the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

► Building the collection

The Society quickly began to amass artifacts, archival collections and historic homes. Its original museum on the 7th floor of the county courthouse was a logical choice given Heath's role as a county board supervisor. It also made it easy to forge a connection between the independent organization and the county government.

The Society soon established itself as the third-party repository for Milwaukee County government records that



MILWAUKEE PUBLIC MUSEUM A New Home and a New Name

Wisconsin's most-visited museum, the Milwaukee Public Museum will become the Nature & Culture Museum of Wisconsin when it opens its new home in downtown Milwaukee in 2027.

The architectural design of the new museum was inspired by the unique rock formations at Mill Bluff State Park in central Wisconsin and the confluence of Milwaukee's three rivers. The five-story building will feature four floors of exhibits, a rooftop terrace, an enclosed butterfly garden, and a planetarium.

The museum, separate from the Milwaukee County Historical Society, operates under a public-private partnership, with Milwaukee County owning the current building and the more than 4 million items in its collections, while a nonprofit manages the museum. The ownership structure will change with the new facility as the nonprofit assumes more responsibility, but the county will remain a supporter.

To plan a visit to the Milwaukee Public Museum and learn more about the new museum and its galleries, visit MPM.edu. □

had passed their retention period yet remained historically significant. While all other counties transfer their records to the Wisconsin Historical Society, Milwaukee County continues to retain them locally. As a result, its collections include important civil court, probate, naturalization, coroner and other records.

► A new headquarters

By the late 1950s, the Society had outgrown the courthouse and needed better headquarters and a professional staff. In 1963, the relationship with the county was formalized (though the Society remained independent), and additional county funding enabled the hiring of professional staff. In 1965, the First Wisconsin National Bank closed a downtown Milwaukee branch and donated the building to the county to serve as the new headquarters.

Over the next 40 years, the Society adapted the building to create exhibit galleries featuring architectural remnants from prominent homes and businesses while also hosting researchers. As its records and collections grew, several off-site storage locations were utilized. Finally, in 2004, the Society began a major renovation of the building, returning it to the grandeur of its early days while updating its mechanical systems, offices and Research Library.


► The pillars of today

Today, the Society operates on three main pillars that provide the foundation of its research, education and acquisition work.

The Research Library, with its 1 million photographs, 3,000 manuscript collections, and more than 12,000 cubic feet of county records, serves over 5,000 patrons a year for in-person and virtual research.

The education department's core programs include field trips to the Society's headquarters and to Trimborn Farm, the county's only historic park. Its "Hands on History" program brings history lessons to local schools, with professional educators using artifact and activity kits to lead one-hour classroom sessions and help bridge educational gaps. Students are encouraged to handle artifacts, ask questions and draw meaningful conclusions about the past. Together, these

Continued on page 12

 pfm

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.



The Milwaukee County Historical Society building, circa 1960

role in the development of Milwaukee County.

The Society continues to work closely with the Milwaukee County government to preserve and make historical records available, prepare for digital records, and steward historic locations such as Trimborn Farm. As the Society looks to the future, it aims to maintain its relationship with the county while ensuring its long-term sustainability through mission-driven activities. ■

Ben Barbera is the executive director of the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Continued from page 11

programs serve 9,000 students across the county each year.

The Society's ever-growing collection, which now exceeds 80,000 artifacts, supports the evolution of its exhibits and research. This year, the Society is closing its successful exhibit on the history of beer and brewing and opening a new semi-permanent exhibit exploring immigration's



VISIT & LEARN MORE

The Milwaukee County Historical Society headquarters is located at 910 N. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in Milwaukee. Its hours and fees vary. Visit MilwaukeeHistory.net for more information.

Architecture
Engineering
Environmental
Planning
ISGInc.com

**PRESERVING
COMMUNITY
HERITAGE**
Through Thoughtful Design

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



The former Masonic Temple building in Sparta has been the home of the Monroe County Local History Room & Museum since 1993. A second museum, the Deke Slayton Memorial Space & Bicycle Museum, occupies the building's second floor.



MORE THAN A MUSEUM

A Cornerstone of Monroe County's Cultural and Historical Landscape

By Jarrod Roll, Director, Monroe County Local History Room & Museum

In downtown Sparta, tucked within the former Masonic Temple on Main Street, the Monroe County Local History Room & Museum has become far more than a place to store old records and artifacts. For nearly 50 years, it has served as a gathering place where residents, students, researchers and visitors can connect with the stories that have shaped the county.

Founded by county resolution in 1976, the Local History Room & Museum operates as a county department with a strong community focus. Guided by a board of trustees appointed by the county board and working alongside county committees, the museum combines public accountability with hands-on local involvement to support preservation, education and tourism across the county.

“History can be described as an unending dialogue between the present and the past,” said Monroe County Board Chair Cedric Schnitzler, in explaining his support. “The Monroe County Local History Room exemplifies this by connecting present generations to the past and preserving that past for future generations to come.”

► Mission-driven services

The Local History Room & Museum brings history to life for all generations through exhibits, an ever-growing collection of artifacts, documents, photographs, and genealogical resources, and programs for the public and schoolchildren.

Some of its services for Monroe County include:

- Preserving physical records, including collecting artifacts, paper documents and historic photographs from the public as well as county, municipal and school district records
- Sharing the county history through lectures, programs and exhibits, and generating a sense of local pride
- Connecting researchers to their local roots through its research library, archives and website
- Drawing tourists, including bike trail users, campers, bus tours, I-90 pull-offs and holiday visitors
- Managing the Wegner Grotto County Park and overseeing its use, maintenance, marketing and preservation efforts



Each year, dozens of classrooms of students come to the History Room to experience hands-on educational programs.



The exhibit, "Monroe County: A to Z," has won state and national awards for its innovative use of interactive elements to communicate county history.

The Local History Room & Museum staff comprises 2.5 employees. Levied funds pay for 1.75 staff members, with the balance funded by endowment income. They are assisted by a core group of dedicated and skilled volunteers. Operating costs are raised by the board of trustees and through innovative earned-income strategies.



VISIT & LEARN MORE

The Monroe County Local History Room & Museum is located at 200 W. Main Street in Sparta. It is open Tuesday-Saturday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Admission is free. Visit MCLHR.org for more information.

more than just store records. It fosters a deep sense of local identity and pride. Whether welcoming thousands of schoolchildren, assisting researchers from around the

▶ A cornerstone of the county

By balancing fiscal responsibility with innovative public engagement, the Local History Room & Museum does

world, or drawing tourists to the county, this unique county department remains a cornerstone of Monroe County's cultural and educational landscape, ensuring that our collective heritage is not only preserved but also celebrated for generations to come. ■

Jarrod Roll is the director of the Monroe County Local History Room & Museum.



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 | 414-644-0391

www.attolles.com



The Wegner Grotto: More Than a County Park

By Hannah Scholze, Museum Services Associate, Monroe County Local History Room & Museum

The Wegner Grotto County Park, located 10 miles north of Sparta near the community of Cataract, is not your typical county park. Known locally as the “Glass Church,” it is a historic site, a grassroots art environment, and a wedding venue, all rolled into one.

The park began as Paul and Matilda Wegner’s retirement project at their summer home. The Wegners started farming on the property in 1889 after emigrating from Germany. In 1916, they handed over the farm’s operations to a son and moved to Bangor, where Paul owned a Ford dealership until 1927. Once Paul was retired, the couple would spend their summer months on the Cataract farm. After visiting the Dickeyville Grotto, Paul and Matilda were inspired to create their own decorated concrete sculptures.

Between 1929 and 1942, they created a fantastic landscape of concrete sculptures decorated with thousands of glittering glass shards and other found objects, including shells, china dishes, arrowheads, ceramic figurines, and even old light bulbs and glass Novocain tubes. Although neither Paul nor Matilda was a trained artist, their vision and imaginative use of materials make their grotto a significant work of art.

Some sculptures are patriotic in nature, including the “American Flag,” “American Legion Emblem,” and “Gold Star.” Others, such as the “Bremen” steamship, “Anniversary Cake,” and “Home Arch,” hold special significance for the Wegner family.

Most of the sculptures, however, reflect Paul and Matilda’s faith. They include a “Prayer Garden,” “Crown of Righteousness,” “Jacob’s Well,” “Pulpit,” and a large “Peace Monument.” The best-known sculpture is the “Glass Church” (pictured on page 6), which depicts 11 mainline Christian denominations around the exterior and the Jewish Star of David above the door, with the

words “One God, One Brotherhood.” The church interior measures just 10 feet by 12 feet and seats only a handful of people, yet it has hosted more than 70 weddings and Paul’s funeral in 1937.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the site drew hundreds of visitors each week. Over time, however, the sculptures fell into disrepair.

In 1986, the Kohler Foundation purchased the site from the family as part of its commitment to preserving significant outdoor art environments. The foundation restored the sculptures, including extensive structural stabilization and surface repairs. Kohler gifted the site to Monroe County in 1987 to serve as a county park. Since then, the park’s preservation and use have been overseen by the Monroe County Local History Room & Museum.

The restoration and preservation of this unique and fragile art environment remain among its biggest ongoing challenges. “The sculptures at the Wegner Grotto are like sandcastles on the edge of the sea,” explains Local History Room & Museum Director Jarrod Roll. “They are always in some state of erosion due to their age and exposure to the elements.”

In 2006, the Wegner Grotto Endowment was established to ensure its long-term care and preservation. Since then, the county has worked with restoration specialists and local craftsmen on a variety of repair projects.

Today, the Wegner Grotto County Park is a designated historic site that draws thousands of visitors each year. Weddings still take place at the “Glass Church.” The largest event each year is “Art Outdoors,” a free make-and-take art day held on the fourth Saturday of August. Visitors of all ages can create mosaics, sculpt with clay, or participate in other art activities inspired by the sculptures and the park. □



VISIT & LEARN MORE

The Wegner Grotto County Park is located at 7788 Daylight Road near Sparta. It is open during daylight hours, Memorial Day through Labor Day. Admission is free. For more information, visit MonroeCountyHistory.org.





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.

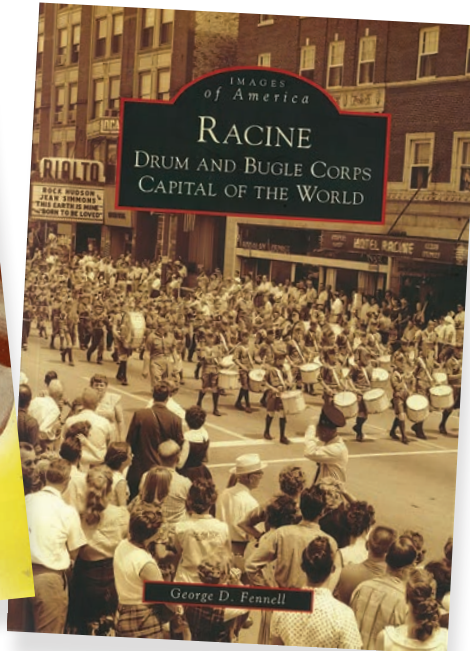
Minimum participation requirements may apply for bundling programs. Benefits and programs may not be available in all states or for all group sizes. Components subject to change.

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



FROM BELLES TO DRUMS AND BUGLES

Telling the Story of Racine County

By Mya Giuliani, Marketing Director, Racine Heritage Museum

In downtown Racine, just a few blocks from beautiful Lake Michigan, the Racine Heritage Museum invites visitors to explore the stories, people and industries that have shaped the county over generations.

Housed in an historic Carnegie Library and partially funded by the county, the museum traces its origins to the formation of the local Old Settlers' Society in 1870. Today, with a catalog of more than 200,000 artifacts, its exhibits and collections span the breadth of Racine County history — from Indigenous communities and early settlement to the rise of the industries and innovations that transformed the area into a manufacturing powerhouse.

A visit to the Racine Heritage Museum can take guests from one remarkable story to the next. Its

exhibits highlight nationally known companies with Racine roots, including Western Publishing, Dremel, InSinkErator, Hamilton Beach and the Case Corporation.

Visitors might encounter women's military uniforms in the museum's newest exhibit, "Workers, WACs and Weddings," marvel at a massive Fresnel lighthouse lens,

examine instruments from Racine's famed drum and bugle corps, and discover a real Egyptian mummy brought to Racine by malted milk pioneer William Horlick.

The museum doesn't confine its history to its exhibition galleries. Its mission encompasses archival preservation, oral history projects, educational outreach, and the promotion of books on Racine's history and locally made art.



The Mitchell Motor Car Company, which went bankrupt in 1923, began in the mid-1800s building wagons.



The displays highlight the county's rich history with Lake Michigan.



Wheat seed from the Walter Jones Farm, circa 1900.

An 1888 Bohemian schoolhouse owned by the museum is central to its educational programming. Built by immigrants to teach

children their native language and culture, the one-room schoolhouse offers visitors a glimpse into life at the turn of the last century.

The museum also helps tell Racine County's broader stories through partnerships such as the Racine Underground Railroad Freedom Heritage Trail, created in collaboration with the Professional Women's Network for Service. The self-guided trail links historical markers throughout the county, highlighting Racine's role in Wisconsin's abolitionist movement and the journey to freedom for Joshua Glover, which helped to spur opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act.

The Racine Heritage Museum also houses the Racine County Sports Hall of Fame, which celebrates the county's rich athletic legacy. Exhibits highlight local baseball teams, including the Racine Belles, who played in the World War II-era women's league, and the Racine Blues, a semi-pro Black team that played until the 1970s. They also feature memorabilia from standout athletes with ties to Racine County, including basketball players/coaches Caron Butler and Kiesha Oliver-Hayes, and football player Tony Romo.

Each year, the hall of fame inducts five new members during a community celebration that also honors outstanding local high school athletes, enabling the county's newest



VISIT & LEARN MORE

The Racine Heritage Museum is located at 701 Main Street in Racine. The museum is open Tuesday–Sunday, hours vary. Admission is free. Visit RacineHeritageMuseum.org for more information.

generation of competitors to connect with some of its most accomplished sports figures.

Together, these exhibits and programs preserve artifacts and, perhaps even more importantly, the stories and traditions that continue to shape Racine County. ■

Mya Giuliani is the marketing director for the Racine Heritage Museum.

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



Protecting an Archaeological Treasure in Sauk County

MAN MOUND PARK

*By Jekka Alt, Parks and Recreation Manager, Sauk County;
and Paul Wolter, Executive Director, Sauk County
Historical Society*

Rising from a quiet stretch of prairie east of Baraboo is a rare archaeological treasure — a massive human-shaped earthwork built more than 1,000 years ago by Indigenous people of the Late Woodland period. Known as Man Mound, the site is the last surviving monumental anthropomorphic effigy mound in North America. Due to its extraordinary cultural and historical significance, it is both a National Historic Landmark and listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The mound, originally more than 200 feet long, depicts a horned human figure walking westward, with its feet to the north and head to the south. Built between approximately A.D. 700 and 1200, the effigy is a striking reminder of the deep history of Indigenous communities in Wisconsin long before European settlement.

The mound's rarity makes its survival all the more remarkable. Although hundreds of effigy mounds once dotted Wisconsin's landscape, Man Mound is the only large-scale human-shaped mound still standing. Parts of





Although hundreds of effigy mounds once dotted Wisconsin’s landscape, Man Mound is the only large-scale human-shaped mound still standing.

the figure’s lower legs and feet were destroyed by road construction and farming, but an 1859 survey by William Canfield documented the mound before significant damage occurred, helping preserve knowledge of its original form.

The Sauk County Historical Society purchased the 1.78-acre site in 1907 to preserve it. For more than 60 years, the organization has partnered with Sauk County to manage the landmark within the county park system. Today, Sauk County maintains the property so residents and visitors alike can experience and learn from this extraordinary piece of Wisconsin history.

That commitment to preservation endures today through a long-term vision for the site’s future. In 2020, the Sauk County Land Resources and Environment Department, the

Sauk County Historical Society, and the Ho-Chunk Nation partnered to develop a 20-year master plan.

In addition to general property improvements, the goals and strategies include restoring the surrounding prairie and natural grasses to create a more immersive educational experience, protecting adjacent cultural resources, and acquiring land or easements to prevent

future development. Together, these efforts aim to manage, preserve, and enhance this historically and culturally significant landmark — an enduring legacy of its creators from centuries past. ■

Jekka Alt is the parks and recreation manager for Sauk County. Paul Wolter is the executive director of the Sauk County Historical Society, which was founded in 1905.



VISIT & LEARN MORE

Man Mound Park is at E13085 Man Mound Road near Baraboo. There is no entrance fee. To learn more, visit bit.ly/Man_Mound.



Thoughtful Design. Trusted Expertise.

At Venture Architects, we specialize in planning and designing government facilities that serve your community.

ventarch.com | info@ventarch.com | 414.271.3359





SHEBOYGAN COUNTY MUSEUM

Bringing History to Life

By Brett Lobello, Executive Director, Sheboygan County Museum

A little over a century ago, a group of five men and one woman recognized the need to collect and share Sheboygan County's history and took the first steps toward forming the organization that would become the Sheboygan County Museum.

In 1923, the Sheboygan County Historical Society was created for "the discovery, collection and preservation of information, records and objects relating to the history of Sheboygan County and the dissemination of knowledge concerning the same." It soon began operations, collecting historic objects and spearheading recognition of historic sites throughout the county.

The relationship between the independent nonprofit and the Sheboygan County government began early. One of the Society's first acts was to petition the county in 1931 to establish a historic park on county-owned property known as Taylor Hill. The county had purchased the property, which included a stately 1850s-era Italianate brick house, in 1905 from the estate of David Taylor, a lawyer and

politician who served on the Wisconsin Supreme Court from 1877 until his death in 1891.

The Society's first museum opened in 1934, in the county's then-new courthouse. Much of the early oversight of the collection and exhibits was handled by Eugene A. Hickey, who served as the Society secretary and as Sheboygan County clerk of court. As the collections grew, they soon required more space.

To commemorate the Wisconsin centennial in 1948, the county and the Society solidified their partnership through a long-term lease that established a museum in the former Taylor home, which formally opened in July 1954.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Society relocated three more 19th-century buildings to Taylor Park for visitors to learn about the county's early settlers: the Weinhold Log Cabin, built by German settlers; the Bodenstab Cheese Factory, one of the county's oldest surviving cheese factories; and the Schuchardt Barn, which showcases the county's rich agricultural history.

A 1948 agreement established a Sheboygan County Historical Society museum in Sheboygan County's Taylor Park, which includes the home of 19th century Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice David Taylor.

In 1997, the 6-acre museum campus expanded with the construction of the Main Museum Building, which houses both temporary and permanent exhibits that reflect the broad and diverse history of the county.

Long-term galleries in the Main Museum explore the county's first Native American communities, maritime history along Lake Michigan, the arrival of railroads, Sheboygan's "Chair City of the World" moniker, and local baseball traditions. One exhibit celebrates The Chordettes, the Sheboygan women whose harmonies helped define 1950s pop music with hits like "Mr. Sandman" and "Lollipop." Another explores the history of the Seils-Sterling Circus, once one of the largest truck circuses in the United States and headquartered in Sheboygan County.

Two cornerstone activities expand the museum's community outreach: the annual Holiday Memories exhibit, which has evolved into a multi-week event with entertainment and activities, and K-12 education programs. Both began modestly, aiming to meet a community need, but have evolved into cherished programs. Notably, several current museum board members participated in its education programs as children.



VISIT & LEARN MORE

The Sheboygan County Museum is located at 3110 Erie Avenue in Sheboygan. Admission hours and fees vary. Visit SheboyganMuseum.org for more information.



The Early Sheboygan County Health Care exhibit features pharmaceutical artifacts, medical office equipment, a dental suite and barbershop.



Tracing the history of the area over 12,000 years, the First Peoples exhibit explores the lives of Sheboygan County's first residents from Paleoindians through the Woodland culture and into the 20th century.

In 2023, the Society celebrated its centennial and strategically rebranded as the Sheboygan County Museum. At the same time, the museum began a full inventory of its vast collection, enabling staff to further engage the community and strengthen local ties.

The close partnership and support from the county government are key to preserving county history. The strong collaboration also drives vital engagement with Taylor Park's historic and natural resources.

For over 102 years, the Sheboygan County Museum has been dedicated to serving the people of Sheboygan County, striving to ensure anyone in the county can see themselves reflected in the collection, stories and exhibits. ■

Brett Lobello is the executive director of the Sheboygan County Museum.

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 | parts@thilltractor.com

Savings
Partnerships TRUST
High Corporate Standards
WCA Innovation
SERVICES
Advancement INC.
Opportunity Efficiency
Collaboration
Investment in Tomorrow
**Meaningful
Solutions**



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.

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



‘It Was Fair, I Was There’

CELEBRATE JUROR APPRECIATION MONTH IN SEPTEMBER

By Rebecca Frank Dallet, Justice, Wisconsin Supreme Court

When we think about participating in our democracy, we often think about exercising our right to vote. But there is another essential way that we participate — by serving as a juror. Jury trials protect against government tyranny and corruption by placing the power of one of the three branches of government into the hands of the people.

It is jurors who impartially assess the evidence when the government accuses someone in their community of committing a crime. And in civil cases, jurors are the ones who determine whether someone is responsible for causing harm to one of their neighbors.

As a circuit court judge for 10 years, I observed firsthand how the jury serves as the voice and conscience of our community. I saw people with different backgrounds, perspectives and lived experiences stepping away from their daily responsibilities to administer justice on behalf of someone in their community. They conscientiously listened to the evidence, took notes, and at the close of the trial, worked together to reach a consensus. When the jury returned to the courtroom to give their verdict, I was always struck by the gravity of that moment. I knew that, regardless of what that verdict turned out to be, justice had been served.

This is how American democracy works.

But just like voting, this pillar of our democracy can only work when people show up. So, how can counties help ensure that every citizen they summon for jury service is ready and willing to serve?

Through appreciation and education. We can't take our fellow citizens for granted.

Judges, court staff, circuit court clerks and others can

show their appreciation of jurors year-round in a myriad of ways — saying thank you in person, sending a letter thanking them for their service, making them more comfortable with fruit and pastries at the start of the day, and making sure instructions are delivered warmly, just to name a few.

How can counties help ensure that every citizen they summon for jury service is ready and willing to serve?



Justice Rebecca Frank Dallet

In September, Juror Appreciation Month, counties can take the opportunity to specifically recognize jurors for their service. In doing so, they help educate the public about the crucial role jurors play in our justice system.

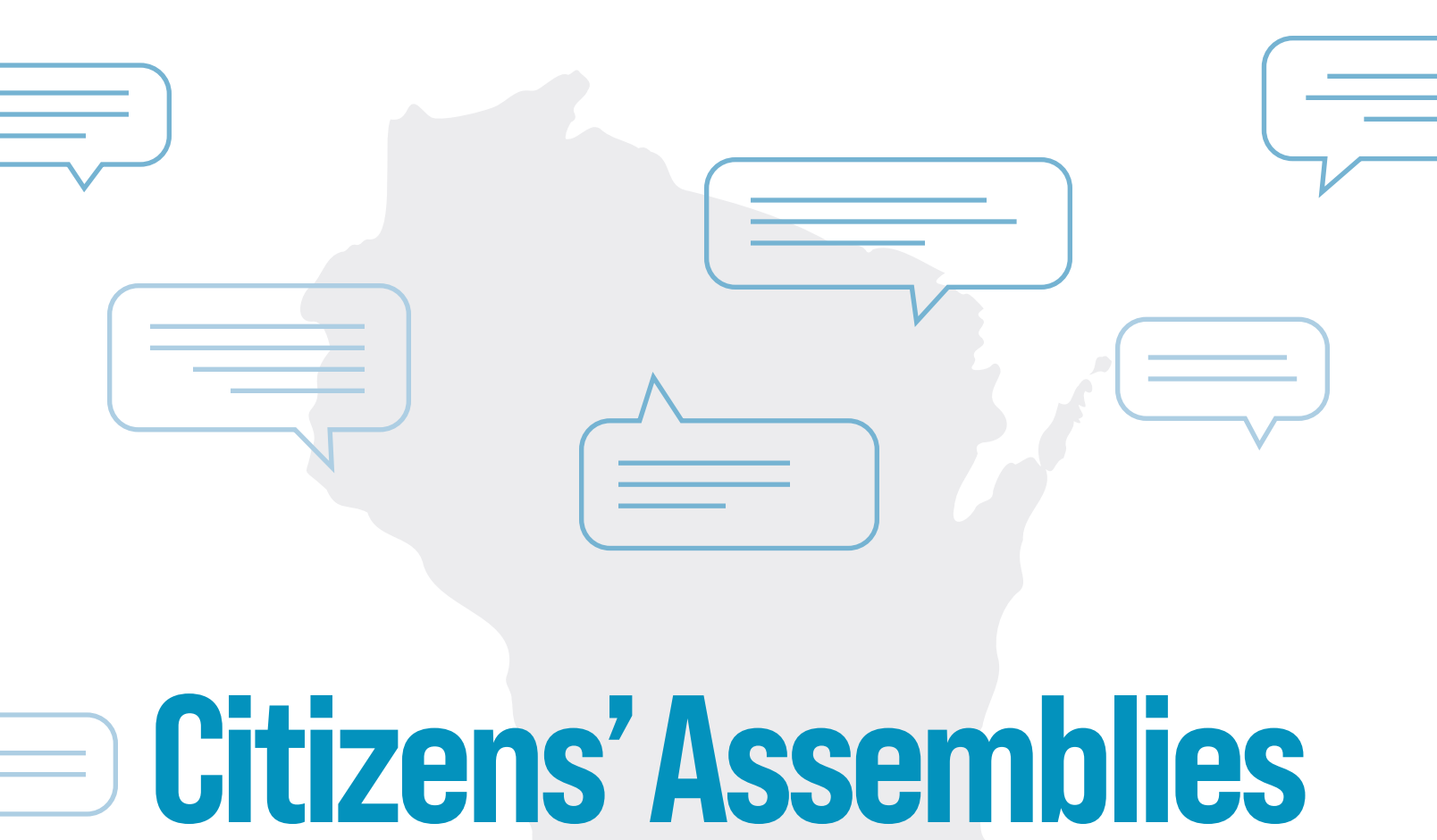
The Wisconsin Court System makes participation easy by providing suggestions for activities, a timeline and templates to get started. They are available at bit.ly/WIJurorAppreciation or use the QR code.

I also encourage counties to think outside the box for ways to foster community engagement, such as creating videos to distribute across various social media platforms.

However you choose to participate, the goal of Juror Appreciation Month and juror appreciation in general is to acknowledge and reinforce to the public just how crucial our jury system is in upholding our democracy.

After all, it is our county's jurors who can attest: "It was fair, I was there." ■

Justice Rebecca Frank Dallet was elected to the Wisconsin Supreme Court in April 2018. Before joining the Supreme Court, she served as a judge of the Milwaukee County Circuit Court, the first female presiding court commissioner for Milwaukee County, a Milwaukee County assistant district attorney, and a special assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Wisconsin.



Citizens' Assemblies

DESIGNING CIVIC HEALTH IN WISCONSIN

By Amber Wichowsky, Associate Professor of Public Affairs, UW-Madison, and Leadership Wisconsin Chair, UW-Madison Extension

Across the country, local governments are grappling with growing challenges to civil discourse, civic engagement and public trust. Elected officials and residents alike report difficulty hearing one another. Nearly nine in 10 municipal officials say civil discourse has declined during their time in office.¹ One-third of Americans believe local officials don't care about the people they represent.² In recent years, we have been inundated with viral news stories about public disruptions at council and board meetings as residents voice frustration at not being heard. You may have experienced this in county government.

What's more, it's hard to bring disparate voices together as more Americans withdraw from local civic life. Today, fewer people belong to groups, volunteer in their communities, spend time with their neighbors, or attend local meetings or events. Declines are most pronounced



Amber Wichowsky

among those without college degrees. Online, the angriest or most extreme posts are the ones that go viral, further distorting public discourse.

► Citizens' assemblies: A new way to focus the discussion

In response to these challenges, some local governments are experimenting with new forms of public engagement to counter

polarization, rebuild trust and address growing social isolation. Citizens' assemblies are one such approach.

Citizens' assemblies, sometimes called civic or community assemblies, are structured public forums that convene a randomly selected, broadly representative group of residents to learn, deliberate and make recommendations on a specific public issue or proposal. While they hark back to ancient Greece, citizens' assemblies have reemerged in recent years as a way



Unlike many public meetings, citizens' assemblies are designed to foster learning, reflection and collaborative decision-making.

to engage communities in shared problem-solving on complex challenges, from affordable housing to artificial intelligence.

Assemblies typically involve 30 to 150 participants and combine expert presentations with facilitated small-group discussions in which participants assess evidence, weigh trade-offs, consider differing perspectives, and explore possible solutions. Participants then reconvene to refine, draft and vote on recommendations that are forwarded to a governmental sponsor, such as a county board of supervisors, for consideration.

Assembly members are selected through a two-step process designed to broaden inclusion. Invitations explaining the assembly's purpose and how participants will be compensated for their time and effort are first sent to community members (or a random sample of community members). Those who express interest are entered into a lottery. Sortition, or selection by lot, increases the likelihood that the assembly will include a wider range of perspectives and experiences.

Although dialogue is important, it's not just talk. Participants respond to a specific question that addresses the core of an important issue and involves trade-offs and compromise.

For example, Lexington, Kentucky, used a citizens' assembly to ask participants whether compensation for city council members should be changed. Boulder, Colorado, used a community assembly to identify locations and approaches for implementing 15-minute neighborhoods, an urban planning model intended to allow residents to access what they need in daily life within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. Snohomish County, Washington, is using a civic assembly to set rules for AI use in government. Connecticut has just launched one of the first statewide, state-endorsed citizens' assemblies to consider whether to change how it pays for and delivers local services.

Unlike many public meetings, citizens' assemblies are designed to foster learning, reflection and collaborative decision-making. Participants receive briefing materials and hear from presenters who inform the deliberations.

Yet, as H el ene Landemore, a leading scholar of deliberative democracy and chair of Connecticut's Citizens' Assembly on Property Taxes, explains, experts are "on tap, not on top."

In some assemblies, participants even help select speakers or experts. Rather than relying on the standard Q&A format that often follows presentations, participants may interview presenters in small groups to deepen their understanding of the issue, explore trade-offs and brainstorm possible solutions. Participants have time to learn about the issue and discuss it together. They then draft and vote on recommendations that are presented directly to decision-makers, who may respond, implement an idea or submit proposals to voters.

► **The benefits of citizens' assemblies**

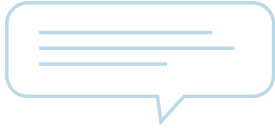
Research has shown that citizens' assemblies increase knowledge, efficacy, civic engagement, openness to divergent views and social trust. There is also evidence that they can reduce polarization, strengthen communities' capacity to address shared public problems and generate actionable policy recommendations. This kind of civic capacity contributes to a community's overall quality of life.

Although more than 700 citizens' assemblies have been convened over the past two decades, they remain relatively new to the United States. Efforts to adapt this model are underway in Wisconsin.

In May 2025, Eau Claire County's Department of Human Services and the Eau Claire City-County Health Department sponsored a citizens' assembly on homelessness, facilitated by UW-Madison's La Follette School of Public Affairs and Division of Extension. Twenty-one participants, representing a cross-section of residents, deliberated on how the county could better engage residents as it develops a plan to make homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring.

The assembly produced 10 recommendations that have informed the work of Eau Claire's new Housing Our Neighbors Collaborative and the development of a comprehensive community plan to address homelessness. As Angela Stokes, assistant director of human services in Eau Claire County, noted, the process provided "an

Continued on page 28



Continued from page 27

invaluable platform” for engaging the community. Participants also gave the assembly high marks, with 85% evaluating the process as collaborative, genuine and worthwhile. Nine out of 10 would recommend citizens’ assemblies to other local governments.

This year, the La Follette School and Extension are partnering with Leadership Wisconsin to expand this model. Leadership Wisconsin is a nonprofit dedicated to building a stronger Wisconsin by increasing leadership capacity. Its Community Leadership 2.0 program helps participants develop advanced leadership skills by focusing on a single statewide issue as a “learning lab.”

In 2026, the Community Leadership 2.0 cohort is exploring Wisconsin’s housing needs and will co-design and facilitate several community assemblies on the issue across the state. The La Follette School and Extension will provide research and facilitation support and conduct evaluations of the effort. In 2027, the plan is to convene sponsors, facilitators, and participants, along with other state and local officials, to

further reflect on the assemblies’ recommendations and the effectiveness of this deliberative engagement method.

There are many ways to strengthen civic health in Wisconsin. Citizens’ assemblies offer a promising way for communities to collaborate on complex public issues. Local governments across the country, including in Wisconsin, are demonstrating how to design for social connection, civic engagement and renewed public trust. If you’re interested in hosting a citizens’ assembly in your community, contact your Extension Community Development educator or visit go.wisc.edu/citizens-assemblies for more resources. ■

Amber Wichowsky is an associate professor of public affairs at UW–Madison and the Leadership Wisconsin chair for the Division of Extension. Her research explores how individuals and communities engage contentious and complex public issues and the social and institutional contexts that shape their civic engagement. Wichowsky holds a Ph.D. in political science from UW–Madison. She is the co-author of “The Economic Other: Inequality in the American Political Imagination,” among other articles and research reports.

1. National League of Cities, “We the Cities: Bridging our Divides,” 2026, nlc.org/initiative/we-the-cities-bridging-our-divides.
2. Pew Research Center, “Why Americans Don’t Fully Trust Many Who Hold Positions of Power and Responsibility,” Sept. 19, 2019, pewrsr.ch/4v8UWLG.

Building Wisconsin Communities

It’s what we do!

 800-552-1171  ehlers-inc.com



- Debt Planning & Issuance
- Financial Management Planning
- Economic Development & Redevelopment
- Investments & Treasury Management
- Arbitrage Consulting
- Paying Agent Services
- Continuing Disclosures

The information does not create or imply a fiduciary relationship. It is solely for the purposes of marketing our services to you. Ehlers is the joint marketing name for all its affiliated businesses. Please visit www.ehlers-inc.com/disclosures for more information.



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   @wcaght

Intergenerational Curriculum

Supporting the Youngest and Oldest Residents of Sheboygan County

By Sophie Woolridge, Community-Engaged Scholarship Storytelling Intern, Morgridge Center for Public Service; and Abigail Becker, Former Senior Associate for Communications and Outreach, UW-Madison UniverCity Alliance

At Sheboygan County's Rocky Knoll Health Care Center, senior residents gather in a large activity room surrounded by crayons, glue sticks and stuffed animals as a reading of "The Berenstain Bears" echoes through the speakers. Despite the preschool-playroom feel of the space, the residents are not there to revisit their childhoods. Instead, they are joined by six 3- and 4-year-old children for an intergenerational programming session.

Community plays a central role in daily life at Rocky Knoll, a facility that provides short-term rehabilitation and long-term care. For residents — whether recovering from a stroke or hip surgery or living with dementia — connection and social engagement shape how they live each day. Intergenerational programming, which brings different

age groups together for shared activities, is one way Rocky Knoll makes each day meaningful.

According to Kayla Clinton, Rocky Knoll's nursing home administrator, intergenerational programming fosters a unique environment that nurtures exceptional possibilities for both young children and older residents. For example, one might see a child learning to walk alongside an adult regaining mobility. Overall, the program creates a space where people of different generations and abilities can learn from one another.

"When you think of language development for children, confidence, exposure and socialization are really important," Clinton said. "On the other end of the spectrum, loneliness and isolation are huge challenges our residents combat, and so having those opportunities and touchpoints is really just a win for everyone."

In June 2020, Rocky Knoll opened its on-site child care center, funded with approximately \$118,000 from the county's five-year capital plan. The child care center, a satellite of Growing Generations, is open to community members, and Sheboygan County employees receive a discount.

While child care is essential to children's and families'



Intergenerational programming, which brings different age groups together for shared activities, is one way Rocky Knoll makes each day meaningful.

well-being and the health of local economies, many Wisconsin counties lack enough licensed child care slots to meet the needs of families with young children.

In Sheboygan County, half of the county's zip codes are classified as child care deserts according to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. A child care desert is an area where there are three or more children under age 5 for every licensed child care slot within a zip code.

"We wanted on-site child care to meet a community need and to recruit and retain certified nursing assistants and registered nurses," Clinton said. "The opportunities for intergenerational programming have directly benefited our residents and enriched their lives."

► Formalizing an intergenerational curriculum

Because of these benefits, Clinton wanted to pursue a curriculum and a system to measure the developmental growth and impact of intergenerational programs.

Through a partnership between Sheboygan County and the UW-Madison UniverCity Alliance, Rocky Knoll staff collaborated with Dr. Naomi Mae W., an assistant professor. She teaches Educational Policy Studies 580, a community-based learning course supported by the Morgridge Center for Public Service that focuses on participatory and community-based research and evaluation.

For Mae, responsibility to community partners is at the core of community-based learning. "You're working with

real people who have real needs," Mae said. "That's the accountability."

A primary goal and the eventual desired outcome of developing this curriculum is the ability to measure and track impact, Clinton said.

"If you're a county board supervisor or a prospective family member bringing your loved one here, we want to be able to say: This is what intergenerational programming means. This is the value. These are the benefits. This is the reach," she said.

The UW-Madison students created three curriculum sessions, with 12 lessons per session; short- and long-term goals to guide the program; metrics to assess its impact; strategies for communicating that impact to the community; tools to identify children's developmental progress; take-home activities; and a brochure for prospective families.

Rocky Knoll staff are already using the materials. "Thanks to the curriculum Dr. Mae and her students created, our residents and little ones explore fun themes together, such as New Year celebrations, winter animals, snowman building, and the Chinese zodiac," Director of Life Enrichment Janine Bolz said. "It's amazing to watch. The kids learn, the residents light up, and you can see genuine connections forming across generations. The take-home activities also bring parents into the experience, reinforcing what their child learned and making it meaningful for the whole family."

For Jada Young, a UW-Madison first-year graduate student in African American studies and a Ph.D. student in educational policy studies, involvement in this course, which provided tangible, real-world experiences and outcomes, solidified her interest in community-based work.

"Developing that type of relationship has been super important for this work — seeing what our community partner wants and putting that at the forefront of what we create for them," said Young. ■

Sophie Woolridge is a community-engaged scholarship storytelling intern with the Morgridge Center for Public Service, which connects UW-Madison students, staff and faculty to local and global communities to build partnerships and solve critical issues through service and learning. Abigail Becker is the former senior associate for communications and outreach with the UW-Madison UniverCity Alliance, which works to connect local governments in Wisconsin to university resources to solve community-identified challenges.

La Crosse County Opening Intergenerational Day Program

La Crosse County recently completed a \$19.6 million modernization of its Hillview campus in the city of La Crosse. The campus features a remodeled nursing home, a new community-based residential facility, and the Hillview Life Center. According to the county, "the center will house Wisconsin's first Intergenerational Day Program, bringing together a YWCA Childcare Center and an Older Adult Day Program supported by the Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) of La Crosse County."

Opportunity for Counties to Save

WITH THE REAL FORESTER POWERED BY AHLBORN EQUIPMENT

Wisconsin, like many states, has enacted legislation allowing public entities to cooperate with one another in a request-for-proposals (RFP) process to procure certain goods and services rather than following individual, traditional competitive bidding requirements. This flexibility enables counties to leverage cooperative purchasing agreements that streamline procurement, reduce administrative burdens, and deliver significant cost savings.

Through this authority, county forest departments, highway departments, park departments and public works agencies can now access a broad range of professional forestry and related equipment through The Real Forester Powered by Ahlborn Equipment.

By using the Real Forester contract, competitively procured through an RFP process administered by Calumet County and established with assistance from WCA Services, Inc., counties can avoid the time and expense associated with developing specifications, issuing bids, evaluating proposals, and managing procurement processes. It allows staff to focus on core responsibilities rather than paperwork.

► Rooted in Wisconsin

Founded in Sayner, Wisconsin, in 1961, Ahlborn Equipment has built a reputation as a trusted partner to chainsaw dealers, arborists, roadway workers and utility crews throughout the United States. The company distributes its Forester brand, as well as many other well-known manufacturer products. As a Wisconsin-based company with deep ties to the county family, Ahlborn Equipment understands the challenges counties face when dealing with budget concerns.

With more than six decades of industry experience, Ahlborn combines product expertise with personalized service to help counties identify the right equipment solutions for their needs. Through The Real Forester platform, counties gain access not only to quality products, but also to a procurement process designed to save time, reduce costs and maximize taxpayer value.

“At Ahlborn Equipment, we don’t just supply products, we work alongside our customers to help them operate more efficiently and cost-effectively,” said Woody Ahlborn, president & CEO of Ahlborn Equipment. “The Real Forester contract provides Wisconsin counties with a clear path to obtaining the equipment they need while reducing their procurement costs and administrative workload. We have worked alongside counties and public entities for years and are excited for this new opportunity to continue and build upon these relationships.”

► Access to leading products

The Real Forester contract with Ahlborn Equipment provides access to industry-leading forestry and land management equipment, including high-visibility forestry apparel, arborist and logging gear, chainsaws, chainsaw accessories, personal protective equipment, and specialized forestry tools. Counties can purchase these products at competitively negotiated pricing, helping stretch limited budgets while ensuring employees have access to reliable, high-quality equipment.

“For our Wisconsin counties managing extensive county forest lands, road rights-of-way, parks, and recreational properties, these savings can add up quickly,” said WCA President & CEO Mark D. O’Connell. “Counties are already purchasing these items, and this contract allows them to get exceptional products for less. In the end, the taxpayers win, and the citizens get better service. This is exactly how government should work.”

► How to access special pricing

Wisconsin counties interested in learning more about the Real Forester contract and available equipment can visit therealforester.com. For questions, contact the director of marketing, Abby Ahlborn, at abby@therealforester.com or (800) 472-7600. ■

WCA Services, Inc. is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Wisconsin Counties Association. It provides programs and services that assist local governments in operating more efficiently and cost-effectively. Visit wcasi.com to learn more.





ORDER NOW AND SAVE MONEY ON FORESTRY EQUIPMENT, SAFETY GEAR & MORE

STEP 1

Visit TheRealForester.com

STEP 2

Sign in by filling out the fields on the pop-up! Or click the login icon to the right of the search bar.

STEP 3

Once your account is approved by Abby, start shopping the extensive list of safety apparel, chainsaw accessories, and more!



BUY NOW!



TheRealForester.com
Abby@TheRealForester.com

Questions?
Call (800) 472-7600
and ask for Tyler



Vino in the Valley, Pierce County

Looking Ahead to Season Five

UNIQUELY WISCONSIN CONTINUES TO GROW AND THRIVE

By Michelle Gormican Thompson, Thompson Communications

When Uniquely Wisconsin began in 2022, the goal was simple: showcase the heart of our communities, its people, and the stories they had to share. Today, 21 counties have been involved across four seasons, with over 1.3 million broadcast views, a staggering 18 million impressions across all social platforms, and three Emmy Awards.

“The vision behind Uniquely Wisconsin was to highlight counties,” said Mark Rose, president & CEO of Discover Mediaworks, which partners with the Wisconsin Counties Association and produces all content. “We have seen it evolve into an award-winning, multimedia brand that



reaches audiences and connects with people on a much deeper level.”

Uniquely Wisconsin uses broadcast television, streaming platforms, podcasts, social media, and digital storytelling. Through these channels, the series has connected with millions

of viewers and online followers and earned industry recognition and Emmy nominations, including three wins, for its compelling storytelling.

This past year’s season four was the program’s strongest chapter yet. It spotlighted a compelling cross-section of Wisconsin stories, from Brown County’s lasting community legacy at Seroogy’s Chocolates to Marathon County’s deep-rooted tradition of ginseng farming.

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 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.



The History Museum at The Castle, Outagamie County



Dells of the Eau Claire, Marathon County

Season Four of *Uniquely Wisconsin* built on the show's successful storytelling approach ...

The season also featured the Outagamie County Community Emergency Response Team (CERT); the Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery in Pierce County, a reflection of Wisconsin's enduring dairy heritage; and Washington County's tribute to the dedicated volunteer firefighters of Slinger. Collectively, these stories captured the character, resilience and local pride that help define Wisconsin.

The season also built on the show's successful storytelling approach, blending long-form documentary filmmaking with dynamic digital content. Through short-form videos, social media features, podcasts, and streaming segments, audiences have experienced Wisconsin stories in fresh and engaging ways.

As *Uniquely Wisconsin* continues to expand, it is helping shape a broader statewide narrative centered on the importance of local communities and the people who keep them strong. Filming for season five has begun and will feature three additional counties and two returning counties: Grant, Washington, Brown, Sawyer, and Walworth. Seasons six and seven are already taking shape.

"With each season, we're reminded that Wisconsin's greatest strength is its people and communities," WCA President & CEO Mark D. O'Connell said. "It's an honor to help share the stories that make our state so special, and we look forward to a bright future with this initiative." ■

Tomorrow takes people.

The transition to a lower-carbon future takes our best people, skills and innovation—and so does securing the essential energy we need today.

Millions of people rely on the energy Line 5 transports every day. That's why we're working to keep this critical infrastructure safe and relocating a segment of Line 5 in northern Wisconsin.

The project will create over 700 family supporting construction jobs and millions in construction related spending to help drive Wisconsin's economy forward.

In this time of global uncertainty, Enbridge is committed to safely delivering the secure energy Wisconsin relies on.

Learn more at enbridge.com/L5Wis.



Honoring the Past
Building *the* Future

Celebrating 250 Years



Wisconsin Counties Association
2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
September 20-22, 2026

See you in Sauk County!

GET READY TO EXPLORE the important issues facing Wisconsin's county officials at this year's gathering, taking place Sept. 20 – 22 in Sauk County.

As we celebrate America 250, we will reflect on our nation's history while looking ahead to the opportunities and progress that will shape the future. Attendees will hear from state and federal speakers, participate in engaging workshop sessions, and connect with colleagues through valuable networking opportunities.

— **REGISTRATION AND ROOM BLOCKS OPEN** —

GENERAL INFORMATION

wicounties.org/conference

▶ Register Online

Registration for the 2026 WCA Annual Conference is **ONLINE**.



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

▶ Transportation

Complimentary shuttle service will be provided on Monday and Tuesday between the participating conference hotels and the Kalahari Resorts & Conventions. Look for a transportation schedule at the WCA registration desk.

▶ Housing Information

Conference hotel room block start date: June 1

Conference hotel room block cut-off date: *Varies by hotel location*

The WCA has room blocks at four hotels in Wisconsin Dells. All room blocks are open. County officials are responsible for booking their own hotel rooms. If booking multiple rooms at any of the WCA-selected hotels, you must have a different name for each reservation. Booking multiple rooms under one name is not allowed. Rooms are booked on a first-come, first-serve basis. Visit the conference event page for a complete list of hotel information, rates and registration links.

If you require an accessible room, please contact the WCA at 866-404-2700 to reserve your room by July 17.

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

► **Spouse & Guest Tour: Lunch, Legends & Live Music**

Monday, Sept. 21 | 11:15 a.m.

Get ready for a fun afternoon of great food, great music, and a little dancing! Join us Monday, Sept. 21, at the Legacy Dinner Theater in Wisconsin Dells for a lively spouse and guest tour featuring the Fleetwood Mac tribute band Hypnotized. Enjoy a delicious lunch served at 11:45 a.m. before the show begins at 1 p.m. Sing along to classic hits like “Go Your Own Way,” “Dreams,” “Rhiannon,” and “Don’t Stop.” Whether you’re a longtime fan or just love great live music, this high-energy performance will have you tapping your feet — and maybe even dancing in the aisles!

Transportation provided. Sign up during the online conference registration process.



KEYNOTE

Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Churchill: A Strategic Approach to Leading in Times of Crisis and Change



In times of crisis and change, effective leadership requires strategic vision, effective communication, visibility, and collaboration to chart a positive way forward. Drawing on the lessons of the past, Dr. Peter Cressy examines how four historical leaders demonstrated eight common characteristics that remain relevant for leaders today.

Cressy is director of Executive Leadership Programs at the Washington Leadership Institute. He previously served 28 years in the U.S. Navy in command and senior staff positions, followed by eight years in higher education as a college president and university chancellor. He later served 16 years as president & CEO of the Distilled Spirits Council trade association.

CONCURRENT WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS

The **WCA Annual Conference** offers concurrent workshops featuring presentations from industry experts and opinion leaders discussing timely issues facing Wisconsin counties. With more than 25 workshops to choose from, attendees can look forward to a range of informative and engaging topics, including:

- Emergency management
- Renewable energy
- Roles and responsibilities
- County-run EMS
- Long-term care
- ADRC
- Transportation
- PFAS
- Working with the media
- Maximizing federal dollars

contact us at 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.



2026 WCA Annual Business Meeting

SUNDAY, SEPT. 20, 2026
Kalahari Resorts & Conventions, Wisconsin Dells
3:30 p.m. (3 p.m. credential pick up)

The Wisconsin Counties Association Annual Business Meeting is held each year during the WCA Annual Conference. Each member county sends a voting delegate to the annual business meeting.



In addition, the WCA president & CEO, vice president of government affairs, and the officers of the association provide reports on their activities over the prior year. A report is also given on WCA Services, Inc., the wholly owned subsidiary of the WCA.

The order of business for the annual business meeting is set forth in the bylaws of the WCA. Delegates to the annual business meeting vote on resolutions forwarded by

All members of the association are welcome and encouraged to attend the annual business meeting. □

2026 WEIGHTED VOTES

Adams 9	Dunn 15	Kewaunee..... 9	Outagamie.....30	Shawano 11
Ashland 7	Eau Claire23	La Crosse23	Ozaukee 19	Sheboygan.....23
Barron 15	Florence 6	Lafayette..... 7	Pepin..... 6	Taylor 9
Bayfield..... 7	Fond du Lac.....23	Langlade 7	Pierce 11	Trempealeau ... 11
Brown.....45	Forest..... 6	Lincoln..... 9	Polk..... 15	Vernon..... 11
Buffalo 7	Grant..... 15	Manitowoc..... 19	Portage 19	Vilas 9
Burnett..... 7	Green 11	Marathon23	Price 7	Walworth23
Calumet 15	Green Lake 7	Marinette..... 11	Racine30	Washburn 7
Chippewa..... 15	Iowa 9	Marquette..... 7	Richland 7	Washington23
Clark 11	Iron..... 6	Menominee..... 6	Rock.....30	Waukesha45
Columbia..... 15	Jackson..... 9	Milwaukee.....70	Rusk..... 7	Waupaca 15
Crawford..... 7	Jefferson 19	Monroe 15	St. Croix.....23	Waushara..... 9
Dodge 19	Juneau..... 9	Oconto..... 11	Sauk..... 15	Winnebago.....30
Door 11	Kenosha.....30	Oneida 11	Sawyer 7	Wood..... 19

▶ VOTING DELEGATES

Q: Who gets to vote at the annual business meeting?

A: The county board chair of a member county is the county's official representative.

Q: What are member counties?

A: Member counties are counties that have paid their WCA dues in full.

Q: What if the county board chair cannot be there to vote?

A: The vice chair(s) of the county board can pick up the credentials and vote for the county or the county board chair may designate another official representative.

Q: How does a county designate an official representative if the chair or vice chair is unable to attend?

A: The county board chair must provide written notice to the WCA president & CEO designating the county's official representative if the county's delegate is not the chair or a vice chair of the county board. The easiest way to designate an official representative is to fill out a business meeting designee form.

Q: Who can be designated as the official representative?

A: Only county board supervisors and elected county executives can be designated as the official representative.

▶ CREDENTIALS

Q: What is a credentials procedure?

A: A credentials procedure is used to ensure that only the county's official representative is seated for the annual business meeting.

Q: How does a county obtain credentials?

A: The credentials can be picked up at the credentials table by the county board chair or the county's official representative. Credentials may be picked up starting at 3 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 20, 2026, in Africa 10-30 at Kalahari Resorts & Conventions.

▶ VOTING PROCEDURE

Q: How will resolutions be acted on at the annual business meeting?

A: The annual business meeting rules state that official resolutions may be acted on as a block after seeking requests for individual action on such resolutions. Official resolutions that affirm current positions included in the WCA Platform may be acted on as a block after seeking requests for individual action on such resolutions.

Q: What motions will be considered?

A: The chair will accept one of four main motions: 1) adoption of the resolution; 2) adoption as amended by the resolutions committee; 3) referral to the board of directors (to be sent back for further study); or 4) indefinite postponement (to reject or kill the resolution). A motion to refer to the board of directors is a priority motion and may be offered at any time.

Q: Will amendments be considered?

A: Yes, any written amendment germane to the resolution will be considered when the main motion is "adoption" or "adoption as amended" by the resolutions committee.

Q: Who can address the annual business meeting?

A: Any county board supervisor or county executive from a member county can address the annual business meeting. WCA staff may address the annual business meeting at the recognition of the chair. Anyone else can address the annual business meeting only if the rules are suspended.

Q: When are weighted votes used?

A: Weighted votes can be used only for official resolutions. Weighted votes will be used if a voting delegate specifically requests a roll call vote using weighted voting; otherwise, a voice vote or a simple roll call will be used. □



Save the dates for upcoming webinars:

- July 22
- August 26
- October 28
- November 18
- December 16

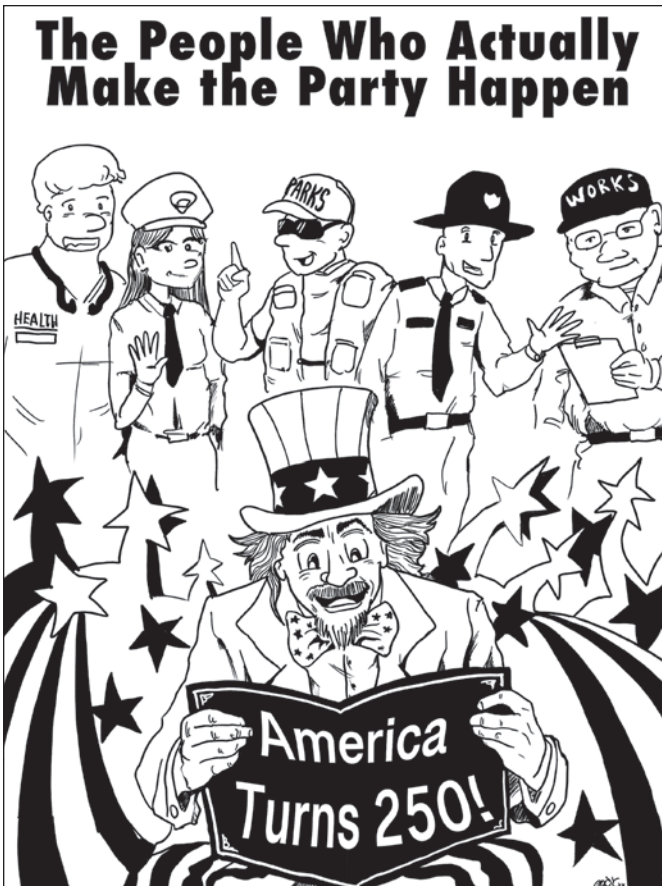
Parliamentary Procedure Focus of July “In the Board Room” Webinar

Effective, efficient meetings are critical to establishing a solid governance structure that citizens can rely on. Too often, counties find themselves caught up in procedural issues that detract from the truly important policy issues of the day. Avoid those procedural hurdles and embrace the structural beauty of parliamentary procedure and Robert’s Rules of Order!

Join Andy Phillips and the Attolles Law team at noon on Wednesday, July 22 for the next installment of “In the

Board Room,” where they will discuss the foundations of parliamentary procedure and the rules governing county board and committee meetings.

Visit 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. ■



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.



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.



Latest Forward Analytics Spotlight Focuses on Wisconsin Housing Outlook

Wisconsin is on pace to meet its target for new housing construction by 2030, but updated state population projections tell a sobering story behind that headline. Forward Analytics finds that a downwardly revised target of 84,000 new units for this decade, which will likely be met, reflects an expected loss of nearly 200,000 working-age residents by 2030. However, if the state can attract more

residents or housing affordability eases and pent-up demand is unleashed, the need for new housing units could reach 228,000 by 2030. This higher target may be challenging to meet unless construction trends improve substantially. □

Visit forward-analytics.net for the full report.



Attend an Agriculture Community Engagement Tour in August

Featuring four tours of modern Wisconsin dairies, Agriculture Community Engagement (ACE®) Twilight Meetings are designed to bring together local elected officials, leaders, educators and neighbors to learn how we can work together for the benefit of our communities.

Each meeting begins with a 6 p.m. dairy tour, followed by ice cream at 7 p.m. and open discussions until 8:30 p.m.

- **Monday, Aug. 24** [Barron County] at Norm-E-Lane at Four Mile Creek Dairy, 1272 7th Ave, Hillsdale
- **Tuesday, Aug. 25** [Clark County] at Norm-E-Lane, W267 Panther Creek Rd, Chili
- **Wednesday, Aug. 26** [Calumet County] at Rivers Edge Dairy, N3485 Church Rd, Chilton
- **Thursday, Aug. 27** [Dane County] at Virhada Holsteins LLC, 9158 Britt Valley Rd, Mt. Horeb

The ACE® Twilight Meetings are hosted by the Professional Dairy Producers and co-sponsored by the Wisconsin Counties Association and the Wisconsin Towns Association. The meetings are free and open to the public. Call PDP to RSVP, 800-947-7379.



Salute to Local Government Awards

The Wisconsin Policy Forum is accepting nominations for the 2026 Salute to Local Government awards. The 34th Annual Salute will recognize the best of our state's public-sector agencies and workers, celebrating the many ways in which their innovation and excellence improve communities throughout Wisconsin.

Award categories recognize state and local governments and school districts, collectively and at the individual employee level, in a range of categories.

To learn more about the award categories, and to submit a nomination, visit wispolicyforum.org/salute-nomination-form.

► *Nominations are due July 31*

FEMA Updates: New Law Improves Transparency; Review Council Recommends Sweeping Changes

Adapted from articles by the National Association of Counties Staff

Thanks to persistent county advocacy, Congress has enacted a landmark transparency reform for federal disaster assistance. Section 313 of the Homeland Security and Further Additional Continuing Appropriations Act of 2026 requires the Federal Emergency Management Agency to publish a publicly accessible, interactive dashboard that tracks all reimbursement requests under its Public Assistance Program — one of the most significant accountability reforms in recent memory.

County governments are on the front lines of disaster recovery, rebuilding roads, utilities and public facilities. In 2025 alone, 680 counties experienced at least one federally declared disaster. Yet for years, counties have submitted reimbursement requests and waited — sometimes for years — with no visibility into project status, cash flow timelines or the sources of delays. Section 313 directly addresses that gap.

Under the new provision enacted in April, FEMA must post reimbursement request data no later than 90 days after receiving it and within 60 days of a project entering final review at the Department of Homeland Security. The dashboard must include:

- Cost estimates, applicant identifiers, submission dates, project descriptions and federal/non-federal cost-share breakdowns for every proposed grant award
- Status and timeline of FEMA’s review, including approval and grant issuance dates
- Plain-language explanations for any cost estimate not approved or any grant delayed beyond statutory timelines, along with corrective actions taken
- Project-level progress updates and individual assistance request data

The new dashboard will give county officials real-time insights into project status, helping them anticipate

cash flow needs and communicate more effectively with residents and elected officials.

► **President’s Council to Assess FEMA report recommendations**

In related news, the President’s Council to Assess FEMA released its final report in May, outlining 10 sweeping recommendations to overhaul the nation’s approach to disaster preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation.

The current FEMA system — while essential — has long drawn criticism from county officials for bureaucratic delays, complex grant requirements, slow reimbursements, and a structure that can slow rather than accelerate local recovery. The council was established by executive order in January 2025 to conduct a full-scale review of the agency and recommend reforms.

► **What the report recommends**

The council’s 10 recommendations span the full lifecycle of disaster management. The most significant include:

- Replacing the current seven-phase public assistance reimbursement model with a direct-funded block grant. The new funding mechanism would send money to states within 30 days of a presidential disaster declaration based on pre-defined event criteria, such as wind speed or flood depth, rather than individual damage assessments. States would distribute and manage funds locally. Counties could gain speed and flexibility but lose the federal project-by-project safety net, with limited recourse for cost overruns.
- Streamlining the current 15-category individual assistance system into a single direct payment of up to \$150,000 for homeowners and up to six months of rent at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development fair

County governments are on the front lines of disaster recovery, rebuilding roads, utilities and public facilities.

In 2025 alone, 680 counties experienced at least one federally declared disaster.

market rate. Responsibility for emergency sheltering would transfer from FEMA to states and territories, with counties expected to play a significant role.

- Replacing the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program with a two-phase rapid mitigation structure that allows for an advance within 30 days and a strategic mitigation allocation within six months, both managed at the state level. Counties would access funds through their states rather than directly through FEMA.
- Increasing the per capita indicators and the minimum state expenditure requirements for requesting a federal disaster declaration. The result is expected to be about 16 fewer federal disaster declarations per year, meaning more disasters would be absorbed entirely by states and counties without federal assistance.
- Gradually shifting the National Flood Insurance Program, which is currently more than \$20 billion in debt, toward the private market through updated risk-based pricing, modernized flood maps and a voluntary policy transfer program.

- Transforming and renaming FEMA with a reduced headquarters footprint and a formal role as “payer of last resort,” meaning other federal programs must be exhausted before FEMA steps in.

The report does preserve critical federal capabilities counties rely on, including urban search and rescue task forces, the National Disaster Medical System, and the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). It also recommends retaining the Emergency Management Performance Grant, with a potential one-time funding increase to support the transition. Smaller, rural and under-resourced counties face the greatest risk if state governments do not adequately fill the gaps created by a reduced federal role.

While the interactive dashboard requirement is now law, the report released in May contains only recommendations. The most consequential changes require acts of Congress to take effect, although regulatory changes could address some elements of the recommendations and executive orders may accelerate certain administrative shifts. Counties should monitor developments closely but should not expect immediate changes to existing programs. ■

Comment by July 13 on Major Proposed Federal Grant Changes

On May 29, the federal Office of Management and Budget published proposed rules that would make sweeping changes to the discretionary grant process. The rules are intended to codify much of what had been proposed as an executive order last August. According to the White House, the new rules are intended to “improve transparency, accountability, and oversight for Federal awards across the Federal Government.”

Among other changes, the rules would require senior political appointees to review and approve discretionary grants. Agencies could still use peer review or grant review panels but in an advisory-only capacity. The rules would also codify the ability of agencies to terminate grants, in whole or in part, at any time if the award no longer effectuates “program goals, (f)ederal

agency priorities, or the national interest ...”

Wisconsin counties rely on a wide range of discretionary grants for transportation projects, cybersecurity initiatives, health and human services, and much more. The proposed rules could introduce greater uncertainties in how grants are awarded and raise concerns about how to manage a project should the grant be rescinded.

Visit the Federal Register at bit.ly/FedReg_GrantRules to access the proposed rules. The comment period ends July 13. More information about the original executive order is in the Federal Update in the September 2025 Wisconsin Counties. NACo has more information about the proposed changes and how to comment at bit.ly/OMB-Grant-Rules. □



LEGAL ISSUES
RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Levy Limits, Debt Levies, and Debt Limits ... *Oh My!*

Andy Phillips, Ben Conard and Thomas Cameron, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.

For many, summer in Wisconsin brings to mind longer days spent outside enjoying the warmer weather. But for county officials and administration, summer can also mean working up the next year's county budget before it is presented to the full county board in the fall.

The budget process is important as counties consider how best to provide necessary services to their constituents and community, given their unique circumstances and limited financial resources.

Because a county's largest revenue source is property taxes, one of the biggest financial limitations placed on counties is the levy limit, which restricts the amount counties can collect from property taxes.

► The levy limit

The levy limit — found in Wis. Stat. § 66.0602 — was added to state law as part of the 2005-07 state budget. The levy limit does not directly restrict local governments from spending up to a certain amount. Instead, it limits the amount political subdivisions (i.e., cities, villages, towns, and counties) may increase their property tax levy from one year to the next. Subject to certain limited exceptions, a political subdivision may only increase its property tax levy from one year to the next by no more than its valuation factor, which is the greater of: (1) 0%; and (2) net new construction.¹ Given rising costs and additional state mandates, limiting the amount a levy can increase means that a county's dollars begin to be stretched thin if there isn't sufficient new development within the county to keep pace with rising costs.

► Reductions to the levy limit

While the statutes define the valuation factor in such a way that it cannot be negative (even if a political subdivision's equalized value decreases), political subdivisions can make decisions that have the practical effect of reducing their maximum property tax levy from one year to the next.

For example, if a political subdivision funded a "covered service" (i.e., garbage collection, fire protection, snow plowing, street sweeping, or storm water management) with property taxes in 2013, and subsequently imposes a fee for that service (such as an annual snow plowing fee), the political subdivision's property tax levy would need to be reduced "by an amount equal to the estimated amount of fee revenue collected for providing the covered service ... not to exceed the amount funded in 2013 by the levy of the political subdivision."

Similarly, if a county transfers a service it previously provided to another governmental unit, the county may be required to decrease its levy to reflect the cost it would have incurred to provide that service, provided that both entities file the appropriate transfer-of-service forms.²

While state programs like the Innovation Grant encourage local governments to think differently about how to provide services, counties should ensure they understand the potential, long-term ramifications on the county's property tax levy limit that could result from changing how a service is paid for or who provides it.³ Essentially, counties should be wary of applying for grant

Before making any changes to how services are funded or provided, counties are encouraged to work closely with their corporation counsel to ensure there are no unexpected ramifications from a decision.

funds today if service costs may return in a few years with no levy authority to pay for them.

► **Raising the levy by other than net new construction**

Under certain circumstances, a county may increase its property tax levy beyond the valuation factor. Two notable examples are: (1) increases following an approved referendum and (2) increases related to general obligation debt service.

Referendum-approved increases. Historically, referenda to raise property taxes beyond the statutory cap have been limited to school districts, which have been subject to revenue limits⁴ since the 1993-94 school year. Over the years, school districts have increasingly turned to voters to exceed their revenue limits for capital projects (such as building a new high school) and operating expenses. In April 2026, school district referenda had a 61% approval rate.

In recent years, other political subdivisions have begun asking voters for approval to exceed their levy limits. In April 2026, nine political subdivisions sought approval to exceed their levy limits. Three of those nine referenda passed (33.3%). While there is no guarantee that voters will approve a referendum — and political subdivision referendum approval rates are much lower than school district referendum approval rates — seeking voter approval to exceed the levy limits under Wis. Stat. § 66.0602(4) is a tool in a county's toolbox.

Debt payments. Under Wis. Stat. § 66.0602(3)(d), political subdivisions, including counties, may increase their property tax levy to pay for general obligation debt service. For purposes of this increase to the levy, "debt service" includes "debt service on debt issued or reissued to fund or refund outstanding municipal or county obligations, interest on outstanding municipal or county obligations, and related issuance costs and redemption premiums." This increase to the property tax levy is sometimes called the "debt levy." Subject to the discussion below, there is no statutory limit on the amount of the debt levy.

While the debt levy is potentially a very large exception to a county's levy limit, the underlying general obligation debt must comply with all applicable statutory and constitutional requirements to qualify for the exception. Four important items for counties to keep in mind as they consider whether issuing general obligation debt might be a strategic piece of their budget plan are:

- **Debt limits:** While there is no statutory limit on the amount of the debt levy included in the annual property tax levy, counties are limited in the amount of general obligation debt principal they can have outstanding at any one time. Pursuant to Article XI, § 3 of the Wisconsin Constitution, the amount of general obligation debt principal any county can have outstanding is limited to 5% of its equalized value.⁵
- **Operating expenses:** Counties cannot use general obligation debt for "operating expenses of the general fund of the county." This restriction does not apply to other political subdivisions. Pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 67.04(1), that means counties may not use general obligation debt for "wages, salaries, fringe benefits, materials, supplies, contractual services, [and] equipment with a useful life of less than one year."
- **Leases:** While general obligation debt is often issued as "general obligation bonds" or "general obligation promissory notes," the Wisconsin Department of Revenue has indicated that lease payments can constitute "debt service" for purposes of Wis. Stat. § 66.0602 (and, therefore, be paid for from the debt levy) so long as the lease meets the requirements for general obligation debt. Often, equipment leases (for large equipment like dump trucks) are drafted not to be general obligation debt so that they do not count toward the local government's debt limit. This means a county hoping to make lease payments from its debt service levy will need to review the relevant lease documents very carefully to ensure they constitute general obligation debt under Wis. Stat. Ch. 67. If the lease payments do

Continued on page 46



LEGAL ISSUES

Continued from page 45

not qualify as general obligation debt, they must be paid from the general fund.

- **Maximum term:** In general, general obligation debt must be repaid within 20 years of issuance. However, debt can have a much shorter repayment period. Counties should work with their financial team, including their municipal advisor, when determining the optimal repayment schedule for their circumstances, including the capital equipment and projects being financed.

► Conclusion

A budget reflects a local government’s priorities. As a result, how to apportion limited financial resources among the various services counties are required to, or want to, provide is a local decision.

This article summarizes the levy limit and some tools available to counties to help stretch their financial resources.

Before making any changes to how services are funded or provided, counties are encouraged to work closely with their corporation counsel to ensure there are no unexpected ramifications from a decision.

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

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

1. “Net new construction” means the percentage change in the political subdivision’s January 1 equalized value due to new construction less improvements removed between the previous year and the current year.
2. Wis. Stat. § 59.605(3)(c)2.
3. More information on the Innovation Grant program can be found in the February 2026 Legal Issues column in the Wisconsin Counties magazine.
4. Unlike counties, school districts are subject to revenue limits, which operate as hard caps on the amount of revenue, from all sources, a school district may raise.
5. While valuation factor cannot be negative, a county’s equalized value can go down from one year to the next. Additionally, some local governments have self-imposed a limit on the amount of debt they will issue, which is lower than the constitutional limit.

OMNIA[®]
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

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

community
INSURANCE

www.communityinsurancecorporation.com

WISCONSIN
Counties

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

The power of coming together.

WCA CORPORATE PARTNERS

