



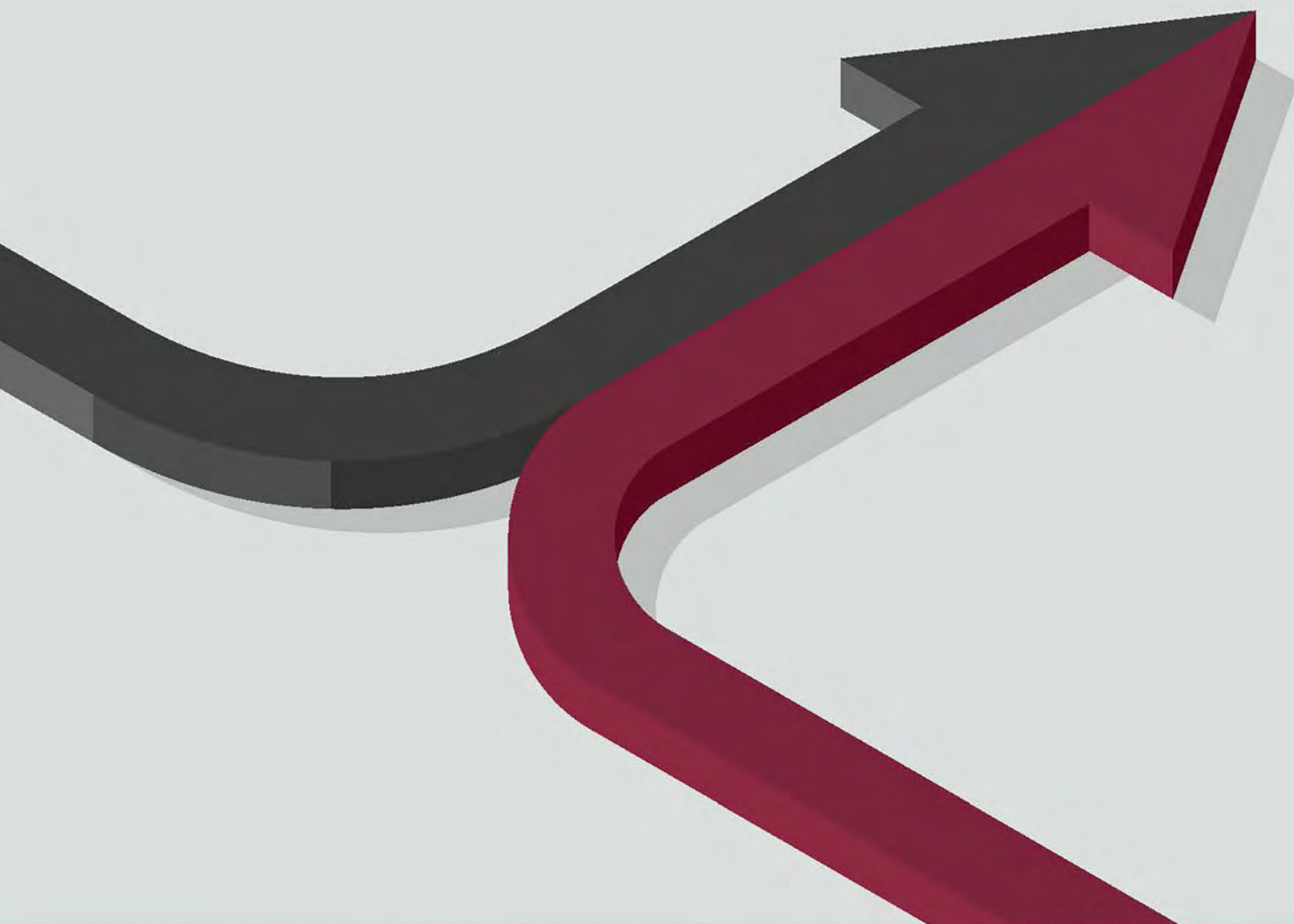
WISCONSIN Counties

AUGUST 2026

Fighting Forever Chemicals

How Wisconsin is taking action against PFAS
and protecting public health

ALSO: A Look at Our Energy Future | County Funding 101



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From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

/ President & CEO

Leadership Begins With Showing Up

Success often begins the same way: by showing up. This is equally true of the hard work of our democracy. Counties succeed because people show up and engage throughout the year, but at no time is that more evident than on election day.

As this issue of Wisconsin Counties is reaching mailboxes, Wisconsin is just days away from the August partisan primary elections.

Whether you are in elected office, work or volunteer as an election official, or simply take the time to vote, government is stronger because you choose to participate.

In April, hundreds of new faces joined county government following the spring nonpartisan elections. About 22% of the current county board supervisors were elected to their first terms, meaning that more than one in five county supervisors across Wisconsin are new to county government this year.

Showing up is the first step. Learning to lead effectively comes next. County government is complex, and understanding the role's responsibilities takes time. That is why investing in education and leadership development is a WCA priority.

One of the best opportunities is the WCA Annual Conference, Sept. 20–22 in Sauk County at the Kalahari Resort in Wisconsin Dells. New and experienced county officials can build a solid foundation through sessions on Robert's Rules of Order and county governance, exchange ideas, explore emerging issues, and discover innovative programs from counties throughout Wisconsin.

I encourage every county to send a strong delegation

and take full advantage of all the conference offers.

A preview of the planned workshops starts on page 39.

Showing up for local government today is important, but we also need to think about who will step forward tomorrow.

Across Wisconsin, counties are finding creative ways to introduce young people to local government and inspire future civic leaders. In this issue, you'll read about the Youth in Governance program, facilitated by UW–Madison Extension and now operating in eight Wisconsin counties. The program supports young people who are appointed as non-binding voting members of county boards or committees. The experience gives young people firsthand insight into how county government works and brings the youth perspective into board conversations.

In these programs, as in the County Government Day programs held in other counties, the young participants often quickly realize that county government shapes the roads they travel on, the parks they enjoy, the public safety services they rely on, and countless other aspects of daily life. Seeing that connection up close transforms civic engagement from an abstract idea into a personal responsibility.

Strong counties don't happen by accident. They are built by people willing to step forward — to learn, to listen, to lead, and to serve.

Every meeting attended, every vote cast, every difficult conversation, and every new leader welcomed helps strengthen our counties and our state. Thank you for continuing to show up. I look forward to seeing you in Sauk County this September as we continue to learn from one another and move Wisconsin counties forward together. ■

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

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While the scientific community continues to learn more about PFAS, Wisconsin recently made significant progress on policy. After four years of negotiations between Republican lawmakers and Gov. Tony Evers, state leaders reached a bipartisan agreement to release funding for testing, remediation and well replacement while also establishing greater regulatory certainty. The deal created a line item in the state budget, allowing Wisconsin to continue investing in long-term PFAS response efforts.

This feature series, including the Legal Issues column on page 44, will examine the challenges created by PFAS and the steps being taken by counties, the state and the federal government to educate our communities and find solutions to protect public health and our natural resources.



Understanding PFAS

A GROWING CHALLENGE FOR WISCONSIN

By Andy Phillips and Evan Claditis, Attolles Law, s.c.

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are a large class of man-made chemicals that have been used in industrial applications and consumer products since the late 1940s. Although scientists have identified more than 10,000 PFAS compounds, perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) are two of the most widely used and extensively studied chemicals in the PFAS family.

For decades, PFAS were found in countless everyday products, including fast-food wrappers, microwave popcorn bags, nonstick cookware, carpeting, stain-resistant fabrics, shampoos, cosmetics, and even toilet paper and dental floss. Because of their unique ability to coat ignited fuel sources and suppress combustion, PFAS substances have long been present in aqueous film-forming foam (AFFF), which has been used since the 1960s to control and extinguish Class B aviation and other shallow-spill fires. With high concentrations of PFOA and PFOS, AFFF has been a leading source of contamination in groundwater and drinking water systems.

PFAS are often referred to as “forever chemicals” because they contain an extremely strong carbon-fluorine bond, making them highly resistant to natural degradation and extraordinarily persistent in both the environment and the human body. Nearly all Americans have been exposed to PFAS, and national studies estimate that approximately 99% of the population has detectable levels in their blood. While Wisconsinites appear to have slightly lower detectable levels compared to the national average, PFAS have nevertheless been identified in every corner of the state.

► Why do we care?

When products containing PFAS are spilled, sprayed or disposed of, PFAS readily migrate through soil into groundwater, contaminating public drinking water systems, private wells, lakes and rivers. Investigators have identified PFAS contamination at landfills, hazardous waste sites, and airports and firefighting training facilities where AFFF was discharged. In addition, the land application of biosolids (e.g., eco-friendly fertilizers from sewage sludge) has introduced PFAS into agricultural fields, leading to contamination of grazing livestock, crops and fish inhabiting affected waters.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, people may be exposed to PFAS by drinking contaminated municipal or private well water, eating fish with elevated PFAS concentrations, consuming food grown or raised near contaminated areas, eating food packaged in PFAS-treated materials, or using certain grease-resistant, water-resistant, or water-repellent consumer products.

PFAS’s persistence and ability to accumulate in human tissue over time make PFAS contamination a serious public health threat. Studies have shown that PFAS exposure may be associated with decreased fertility, pregnancy-induced hypertension, thyroid hormone disruption, immune system impairment, birth defects and developmental delays in children, and an increased risk of prostate, colon, kidney, liver and testicular cancers.

According to UW-Madison Extension, the challenge is exacerbated by the difficulty in testing for PFAS. Many water sources across the state have not yet been tested for these chemicals due to the level of expertise and equipment required to conduct the tests and interpret the results. ■

See the Legal Issues column on page 44 for an update by Attolles Law on relevant laws and court action.

THE NEXT STEP in Wisconsin's Fight Against PFAS

By Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Staff

In April, Gov. Tony Evers signed two bills into law that will help Wisconsin's communities address PFAS contamination, particularly in drinking water. Passed unanimously by the State Assembly and Senate, 2025 Wisconsin Acts 200 and 201 work in tandem to create new PFAS-focused grant programs and initiatives. Together, these bills are a critical step toward ensuring that Wisconsinites have access to safer water and reduced PFAS exposure in the environment.

Act 200 provides access to a segregated account that was authorized by the 2023-25 state budget for PFAS remediation. Originally allocated \$125 million, the account now has \$132 million with accumulated interest.

Act 201 uses those funds to create an Airport and Industrial Possessor Grant Program and municipal and private well grant programs. It also funds provisions for temporary, emergency water supplies; research; fish and wildlife sampling; and additional staffing to administer these programs.

In addition, Act 201 allows for exemptions to the state's Hazardous Substance Spill Law, codifies the DNR's interim biosolids strategy, and directs greater

coordination among state agencies and the Universities of Wisconsin.

► The history of Acts 200 and 201

The new PFAS laws were built on the work of policymakers over the past several legislative sessions.

In 2019, Evers issued Executive Order #40. Among other directives, it created the Wisconsin PFAS Action Council to develop statewide initiatives focused on the growing public health and environmental concerns. This group led the development of the Wisconsin PFAS Action Plan, which is a roadmap for how state agencies address PFAS. Around the same time, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources set up the Office of Emerging Contaminants.

During the 2023-24 legislative session, a PFAS bill was approved by the Legislature but vetoed by Evers due to concerns about how it would restrict the state's Hazardous Substance Spill Law. After negotiations with the governor, legislators introduced new bills during the 2025-26 legislative session that became Acts 200 and 201.

► Implementing the laws

DNR teams have begun implementing these new laws,





The DNR expects grants for sampling private wells, schools, childcare facilities and biosolids to launch in fall 2026.

Grants for sampling related to irrigation and agriculture, wastewater, and landfill leachate will be available in 2027.

focusing on staff recruitment, program development, and communications and outreach. The department has considerable flexibility, so staff are gathering input on how best to develop and implement these programs to support people and communities throughout Wisconsin.

Many of the grant programs created by these laws are new, and the DNR is moving quickly to ensure that programs and assistance are available to those who need them most. The department expects grants for sampling private wells, schools, childcare facilities and biosolids to launch in fall 2026. Grants for sampling related to irrigation and agriculture, wastewater, and landfill leachate will be



MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the implementation of these PFAS laws, visit bit.ly/DNR_PFAS.

available in 2027.

The primary focus of the laws and the DNR's implementation of them is to disrupt exposure

and support communities in their work to do so, largely through developing and implementing drinking water sampling plans and interventions.

► Celebrating a win for Wisconsin

These two new laws are a major victory for Wisconsin in its efforts to reduce PFAS exposure in drinking water, understand the extent of that exposure, and help ensure that everyone in Wisconsin has access to safer drinking water. ■

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Beating PFAS in the Badger State With Lasting Solutions

*By Anne Vogel, Region 5 Administrator,
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*

For more than five decades, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has cleared the air over American cities, helped bring polluted rivers back to life, and returned contaminated industrial land to productive use.

PFAS has become an environmental challenge that defines our era, and it does not yield to the tools that once cleaned up a single smokestack or discharge pipe. These synthetic compounds resist breaking down and accumulate in water, soil and air. In Region 5, which includes Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin, along with 37 tribal nations, the Trump EPA is confronting that problem with decisive action.

President Donald Trump and EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin, who helped found the PFAS Congressional Task Force, have made this a national priority. Our charge in Region 5 is to wield the authorities Congress has granted us

— principally the Safe Drinking Water Act and the Clean Water Act — to reduce exposure now.

Earlier this year, the EPA affirmed enforceable national limits for the two most-studied PFAS compounds, PFOA and PFOS, at four parts per trillion each — among the most protective drinking water standards the agency has ever set. These maximum contaminant levels rest on peer-reviewed science and on treatment technology already proven to bring water systems into compliance. Public systems must now monitor, treat where necessary, and report their results, meeting either the federal standard or a stricter state one.



Anne Vogel



The most lasting solution is to keep PFAS out of the environment in the first place, which makes destruction and disposal technology a research priority.



We have also reopened the rulemaking for four additional determinations — covering PFHxS, PFNA, HFPO-DA, and a hazard index for mixtures that include PFBS — to repair the legal flaws that left the prior administration’s version exposed to challenge.

Winning the fight against PFAS doesn’t just require new regulations; it also requires funding for states and localities. Public water systems can’t turn on a dime to implement new standards in an achievable, affordable way. That’s especially true for small and rural municipalities with smaller tax bases and fewer resources to draw on. The last thing we want is to impose costly, unachievable mandates on water utilities — which are passive receivers of PFAS, not the source — and drive up rates on American families and businesses. That may have been the philosophy of the previous administration, but not the Trump EPA. We know we can tackle PFAS in drinking water without burdening small, rural communities with costly mandates. That’s why we awarded \$15 million to Wisconsin communities, drinking water systems, and private well owners to support testing, planning, and infrastructure projects that target PFAS in drinking water.

Even more funding is available to address emerging contaminants through the EPA’s Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act loan program and through annual allotments to the Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund programs for Wisconsin. In 2025, for instance, we awarded \$19 million to Wisconsin to address PFAS in drinking water, along with a substantial investment of nearly \$146 million to fund lead service line replacement. The EPA has more than \$159 million available across the state revolving funds for Wisconsin

in the current fiscal year. Applying for federal funding, and even just knowing what support is out there, can be complicated, so we also launched our PFAS OUT program to make sure every community and water system is connected to the funding they need to reduce exposure to PFAS as soon as possible.

Decisive action is not the same as centralized action. The officials closest to a watershed — state, county, municipal, and tribal leaders — understand local needs better than any regional or Washington office can. Our role is to equip them with science, technical expertise, and funding; not to hand down mandates from afar.

The most lasting solution is to keep PFAS out of the environment in the first place, which makes destruction and disposal technology a research priority. The EPA evaluates emerging methods continually, judging each against a single test: whether it genuinely protects health or merely relocates the problem. High-temperature

combustion is one promising avenue; and currently, the team in Region 5 is conducting a pilot study with hazardous waste facilities to determine how safely and effectively this method performs.

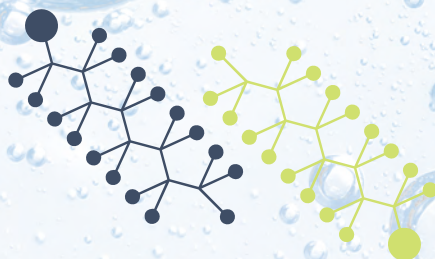
The EPA Region 5 is acting — deliberately, on sound, gold-standard science, and in concert with the states, tribes, utilities, and researchers who share this work — to drive down the exposure that families across the Great Lakes face today. We are working toward solutions and bringing resources to the table to help states, tribes and local governments face this challenge. ■

Anne Vogel is the administrator for Region 5 of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Prior to joining the EPA in April 2025, Vogel served as director of the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency for two years, served as policy director for Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, and worked for more than a decade at American Electric Power Co.



MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the EPA’s work to address PFAS, visit its PFAS OUT website at epa.gov/water-infrastructure/pfas-out.



RESPONDING TOGETHER

How Oneida County Partnerships Are Shaping the Local PFAS Response

By Linda Conlon, Director, Oneida County Public Health Department

PFAS, often referred to as “forever chemicals,” have become one of the most challenging environmental and public health issues facing communities across Wisconsin. Questions about water quality, potential health impacts, environmental responsibility and long-term solutions do not fit neatly within a single department or agency.

In Oneida County, we have learned that responding to PFAS takes more than environmental testing and technical expertise — it takes communication, partnership and a willingness to work across organizations.

County departments, local municipalities, state agencies, community organizations and residents have each contributed to helping our community understand and respond to PFAS concerns.

One of the strongest examples of Oneida County’s collaborative response has been the partnership surrounding



PFAS town halls held for the town of Stella.

As PFAS concerns emerged, local leaders recognized the need to keep residents informed and to create opportunities for questions and discussion. The town of Stella worked closely with the Oneida County Public Health Department, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Wisconsin Department of Health Services to plan and host a series of PFAS town halls.

These town halls became an important part of their communication efforts. Residents received updates directly from agencies, had opportunities to ask questions, and were able to better understand both the environmental investigation process and what was known about possible health considerations.

Each partner brought something different to the table. The town of Stella provided local leadership and direct connection to residents. The DNR shared information on

As PFAS concerns emerged, local leaders recognized the need to keep residents informed and to create opportunities for questions and discussion.

environmental investigation, monitoring and regulatory processes. The DHS provided information on exposure pathways and health considerations. The county health department helped coordinate communication, support outreach and meeting logistics, and translate technical information into language that was easier for residents to understand.

The town halls also showed the value of bringing multiple agencies together in one place. Instead of residents trying to piece together information from different sources, they were able to hear updates together, ask questions directly and continue conversations over time as information evolved.

While public health is not the lead agency for environmental investigation or remediation, the county health department's role has focused on helping residents access reliable information and understand what it means for them. The department has supported community education, coordinated communication efforts, connected residents with resources, provided updates through the Oneida County Board of Health, and worked with partners to share clear and consistent information.

Oneida County has also responded at the policy level. In January 2024, the Oneida County Board approved a resolution supporting expanded well water testing opportunities for areas surrounding locations where biosolids had been permitted for land application. The resolution also supported additional testing and notification measures intended to improve transparency and awareness around potential PFAS concerns.

Throughout these efforts, state agency partnership has remained essential.

The DHS Hazard Assessment Section has worked closely with the county health department and the DNR to identify potential environmental exposures, understand possible health impacts and educate residents on actions they can take to reduce exposure. Through public meetings, resident outreach, direct communication and

ongoing collaboration with local partners, the DHS has supported the community while also gaining insights that contribute to Wisconsin's broader understanding of PFAS-related health concerns.

Community organizations have also strengthened the local response.

Oneida County Clean Waters Action has focused heavily on public education and information sharing. Recognizing that environmental topics are often difficult to follow and not always covered in depth, the nonprofit has developed articles, maintained educational resources, attended local meetings and shared information from trusted outside sources.

Their work has also extended beyond communication. Oneida County Clean Waters Action has helped facilitate the exchange of information between residents, local elected officials, state agencies, environmental organizations and decision-makers. As environmental

Continued on page 14

Continued from page 13

issues continue evolving, organizations that can translate technical information and keep communities engaged become increasingly valuable partners.

Within Oneida County government, the Board of Health, Public Health Department, Conservation & UW Education Committee, and the Land & Water Conservation Department have worked to maintain sustained focus on PFAS by establishing it as a standing agenda item. Eric Rempala of Oneida County Clean Waters Action regularly speaks to this topic and serves as a conduit to the statewide PFAS coalition, keeping both current in a rapidly evolving landscape. His knowledge of PFAS and his ability to communicate clearly on a complex topic have proven indispensable to both our department and committee. Regular updates have helped local leaders stay informed on contamination concerns, funding opportunities, legislation and community needs.



County staff and committee members note that a crucial lesson learned has been recognizing that PFAS is too complex for any one department or committee to address independently. Building trusted relationships, creating opportunities for shared learning and establishing coordinated structures may be among the most effective tools counties have.

As counties across Wisconsin continue to navigate PFAS and other emerging environmental issues, Oneida County's experience has shown that local government does not need to have all the answers. One of our most important roles is bringing together the right partners, creating opportunities for dialogue and helping communities access clear, reliable information.

In Oneida County, education, communication and partnerships will continue to guide our response as we work with residents and partners moving forward. ■

Linda Conlon is the director of the Oneida County Public Health Department.

New Guide for Communicating PFAS Contamination

In 2022, when Dale Grosskurth received notice from state agencies that all five municipal wells in Wausau had PFAS levels exceeding maximum limits, he remembers the feeling. "It felt like a deer-in-headlights experience," notes Grosskurth, Marathon County Health Department's environmental health resources coordinator. "Our initial concern was providing residents and businesses with information that would best help them make good decisions."

At that moment, he knew his department lacked sufficient information about PFAS contamination to respond effectively, so he reached out to his state contacts for guidance.

Bret Shaw, a UW-Madison Extension specialist and professor in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, studies how communities perceive risks and how communication messages can be used to improve efficiency on topics such as water



ACCESS THE GUIDE

The guide is a free resource available at go.wisc.edu/PFAS-Communication-Guide or use the QR code.



quality. "In situations like these, people aren't just looking for data and science," he says. "They're looking for clarity and guidance on what they can do to protect themselves and their families."

Extension and campus collaborators, including Shaw, conducted research into what people want to know about PFAS in their water and how they respond to different types of messages. Using this research, they created a communications guide that outlines key findings public health professionals can use to conduct more effective outreach.

The new PFAS in Drinking Water Communication Guide helps users craft clear, culturally nuanced messaging that focuses on actionable information. Rather than emphasizing the chemistry of PFAS, the guide offers practical recommendations for communicating uncertainty and addressing fear. □

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Photo courtesy of the Dane County Regional Airport

DANE COUNTY REGIONAL AIRPORT PILOTS PFAS REMEDIATION PROJECT

In January, the Dane County Regional Airport announced promising preliminary sampling data from a pilot project showing a 99% reduction in PFAS levels. The pilot project to remediate PFAS effects is underway on airport property at a former fire training area.

The project targets treatment of a well at the center of a contamination source area. Both the center testing well and the immediate downgradient testing well show significant reductions in prominent PFAS compounds, including PFOS and PFOA. The center testing well saw a 99% reduction in PFAS compounds, and the immediate downgradient testing well saw an 86% reduction in PFOA from baseline concentrations.

Sampling from the targeted testing well showed a dramatic reduction in PFOA levels, from a peak of 20,000 PPT in June 2025 to 2.7 PPT in November 2025. The PFOS sample decreased from 2,870 PPT in June to 3.1 PPT in November.

The pilot project focuses on using an advanced microbial process, pioneered by ORIN Technologies, to break down PFAS and reduce their movement in groundwater from

the primary contamination source area. Dane County Executive Melissa Agard highlighted the importance of the county's investment as a critical step toward addressing PFAS contamination and ensuring the safety of our water resources.

"The pilot study's initial positive results show the importance of Dane County's proactive investments in PFAS remediation," said Agard. "Our science-driven approach helps protect our community for future generations and positions Dane County as a leader in addressing environmental risks."

Work at the former fire training site builds on an initial remediation pilot project with ORIN Technologies at the airport's Truax Field in 2021, which demonstrated an average removal rate of 97% at a downgradient test well. The strong results from that project led to the expansion of the PFAS pilot remediation process to evaluate whether it could address source contamination.

The Dane County Regional Airport invested \$1.5 million to scale up the groundbreaking remediation process, with partial funding from revenue the Dane County Board

earmarked from an unrelated lawsuit involving a proposed development. Work on the pilot project continues, with another round of sampling underway this year.

“Dane County Regional Airport is leading the way with an innovative approach to address PFAS that is the first of its kind in the country,” said Mark Papko, executive director of the airport. “Now that we have kicked off the airport master plan process at the airport, we can potentially incorporate this technology into a larger area for remediation as part of the master plan if we continue to see strong results.”

The pilot remediation work is being carried out in coordination with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, ORIN Technologies, a Verona, Wisconsin-based

company, and Fixed Earth Innovations, headquartered in Canada. The two companies have formed a joint venture.

Monitoring and sampling continue at the pilot project site to determine whether the process will maintain the reduced PFAS levels observed during the 2021 pilot project at Truax Field. At the conclusion of the current pilot project, the airport will evaluate next steps and potential options for incorporation into the airport master plan. ■

Editor's note: Numerous treatment technologies for PFAS are emerging. The Wisconsin Counties thanks Dane County for sharing information about its ongoing pilot project.

New Toolkit for Supporting Private Well Owners



Wisconsin residents, especially homeowners with private wells, are increasingly concerned about PFAS in their drinking water. Roughly 30% of the state relies on private wells and the homeowners are expected to test their wells routinely for a variety of water quality parameters and contaminants, including PFAS. But PFAS testing is expensive, costing between \$400 and \$700 per well.

Those affected by PFAS have to make sense of unfamiliar science, interpret complex test results, and decide what actions to take, often while navigating fear and uncertainty. That leaves local health departments responsible for supporting private well owners, a challenging task.

As an emerging contaminants outreach specialist at UW-Madison Extension, AJ Jeninga-Nehls collaborates with health departments and community partners to develop outreach and educational materials. “We are looking for ways to support the people doing this work every day and help make a challenging process a little more manageable for everyone involved,” he says.

Jeninga-Nehls collaborated with UW-Madison, the Wisconsin Sea Grant (a statewide research program focused on the Great Lakes), and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to

develop the PFAS Private Well Evaluation Toolkit.

The toolkit guides local health departments through the full process of supporting private well owners with PFAS concerns, from preparing for sampling to conducting outreach, tracking results, and communicating findings. By providing ready-to-use templates, outreach materials, protocols and best practices, the toolkit helps ensure that sampling efforts are organized and responsive to community needs while reducing project time for local partners.

Responding quickly and reliably to homeowners' concerns is important to Anna Hilger, a chemist at the Eau Claire City-County Health Department. Hilger was part of a team of public health professionals who provided input for the PFAS Private Well Evaluation Toolkit. “The tool is organized

step by step to help public health professionals move through the process of assisting private well users easily,” said Hilger. “It includes templates for notification, sampling, and results letters, which provide upfront support for complicated conversations that may arise.”

If you have questions about PFAS or private well testing, contact the Center for Watershed Science and Education at uwsp.edu/center-for-watershed-science-and-education. □

ACCESS THE TOOLKIT

The PFAS Private Well Evaluation Toolkit is a free, evidence-based tool available at go.wisc.edu/PFAS-Private-Well-Toolkit or via the QR code.





When Regulations Miss the Mark

LESSONS FROM MILWAUKEE'S AIR QUALITY DILEMMA

By JJ Sherman, Director of Governmental Affairs, Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce

If you bulldozed the entire Metro-Milwaukee region and planted a forest in its place, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would still classify the region as a toxic air polluter. That might sound like an exaggeration, but it isn't. It is the result of a well-intentioned federal ozone regulation applied in a way that punishes the wrong people, and it offers a cautionary tale for policymakers at every level of government as they consider any new regulations, including those for PFAS.

Under the Clean Air Act, the EPA designates areas as "nonattainment" when ozone levels on local monitors exceed federal standards. Southeastern Wisconsin, including Milwaukee, Waukesha, Racine, and Ozaukee counties and parts of several other surrounding counties, has carried that designation for years. The problem: Most of the ozone registering on Wisconsin's monitors isn't being generated here. Weather patterns push industrial and vehicle emissions from Illinois and Indiana out over Lake Michigan, where they chemically react to form ozone, which then drifts to our shoreline and registers on our monitors. Wisconsin's businesses and residents pay the regulatory price for pollution they had no hand in creating, and roughly 90%



JJ Sherman



of the emissions recorded on our air monitors originate outside our borders.

The consequences are tangible and costly. Manufacturers across southeastern Wisconsin face burdensome permitting requirements and expensive compliance obligations tied to their nonattainment status. Hundreds of thousands of Wisconsin drivers are required to submit to vehicle emissions testing, a program that has consumed nearly \$300 million in state and federal funding since 1984. And yet none of these requirements can meaningfully move the needle on ozone readings because the source of that pollution lies beyond our borders and beyond our control.

To their credit, partners across the political spectrum have taken this issue seriously. U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.) and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources under Gov. Tony Evers have been constructive allies in pressing for federal recognition of our state's unique circumstances, while five of Wisconsin's Republican House members, including U.S. Reps. Bryan Steil, Tom Tiffany, Glenn Grothman, Scott Fitzgerald, and Tony Wied, have introduced legislation in Congress to allow states to seek redesignation when out-of-state pollution is the



primary driver. Progress is being made, but the fact that a multiyear political fight is required to fix what should have been caught in the original regulatory design speaks to a broader challenge policymakers face every day.

Regulations are almost always well-intentioned. Whether it's a building code, an occupational licensing requirement, or an air quality standard, the goal is invariably to make things safer, cleaner or more reliable. But a better standard to judge these regulations should be whether they achieve their purposes and at what cost.

Every regulation carries a price tag. It might be a licensing course required for entry into a profession, the capital cost of new equipment to meet an environmental standard, or the administrative burden of ongoing compliance reporting. Those costs are not inherently bad. When a regulation improves safety or quality, the cost is justified. The problem arises when the cost of compliance grows while the benefit shrinks, or, as in Milwaukee's case, disappears entirely because the regulation is targeting the wrong actor.

This is the essence of what policymakers should be asking before any new rule takes effect: Is this regulation designed to address the actual source of the problem? And once in place, is it still doing the job it was designed to do? A regulation that once made sense may not make sense forever. Technology changes, circumstances evolve and sometimes the underlying assumptions turn out to have been wrong from the start.

Regulatory imbalance doesn't just impose costs; it reshapes behavior. Businesses respond to incentives. When compliance burdens become too heavy or too disconnected from any tangible benefit, companies make rational decisions. They expand elsewhere, hold off on hiring or look for investment opportunities outside the jurisdiction. Milwaukee's situation has created exactly that kind of disincentive, encouraging businesses to locate new operations in other states rather than deepen their roots here.

Finding the right balance requires genuine engagement with business communities, trade associations, local governments and other stakeholders who understand the ground-level impact of rules made elsewhere. It requires honest cost-benefit analysis before regulations are enacted and honest reassessment of whether they are still working once they are in place. It also requires the political will to revisit and reform rules that have outlived their usefulness, even when that is hard.

The regional EPA situation we're faced with is a lesson in what happens when those steps are skipped. We encourage policymakers at all levels to take it seriously, not as an argument against regulation, but as a reminder that good intentions and good outcomes are not the same thing. Getting the balance right is one of the most important things we can do to keep Wisconsin a great place to live, work and grow. ■

JJ Sherman is the director of governmental affairs for the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, which represents 2,000 member businesses with hundreds of thousands of employees throughout southeastern Wisconsin and beyond.

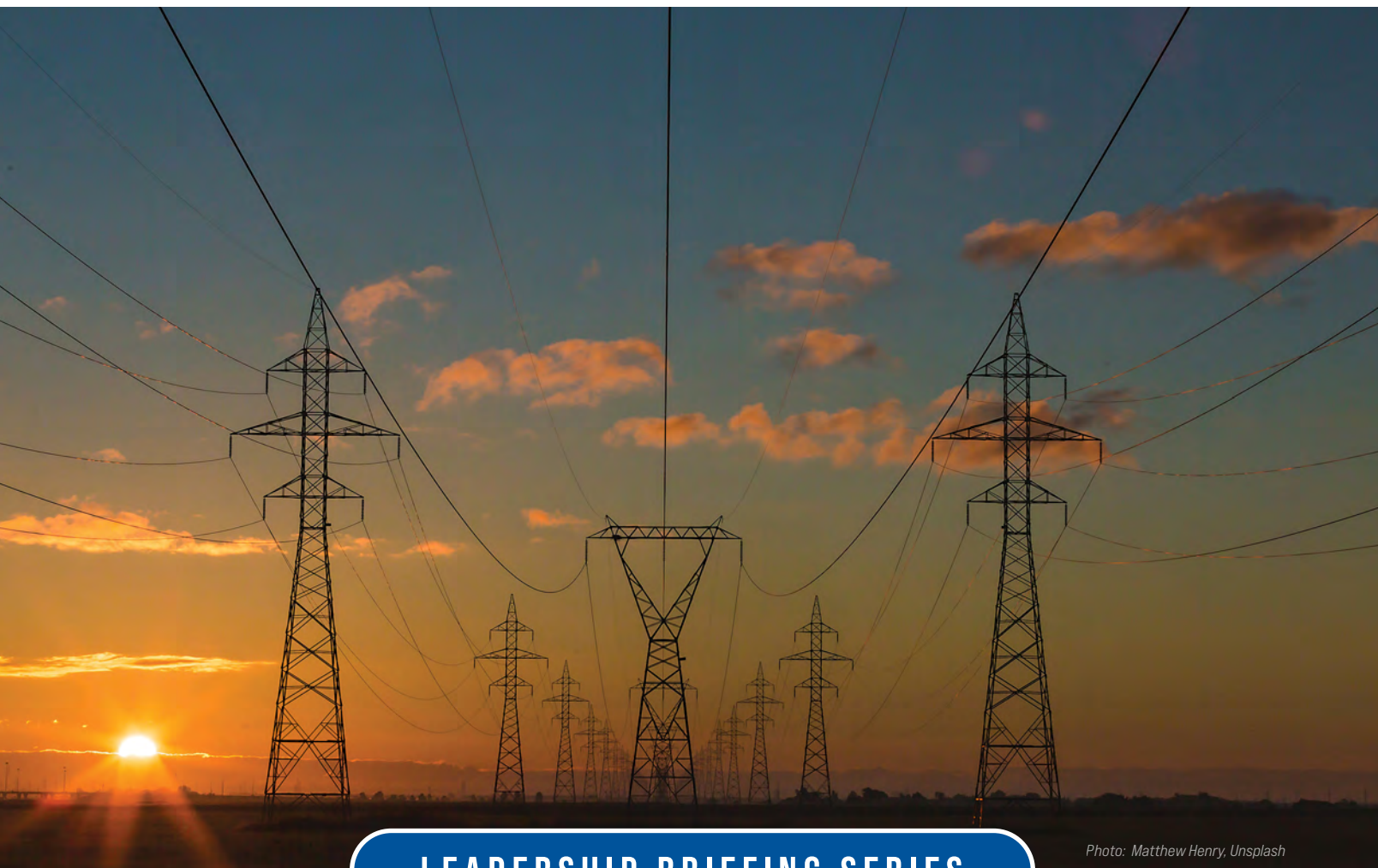


Photo: Matthew Henry, Unsplash

LEADERSHIP BRIEFING SERIES

What Wisconsin's Energy Leaders Say Comes Next

Wisconsin is entering a period of significant energy transition, driven by rising demand, new technologies, shifting generation sources, and increasing pressure on the electric grid.

That was the central message of Competitive Wisconsin's "Leadership Briefing Series: Energy," released this spring, which brought together industry experts to examine the state's energy future. Across the series of briefs, a common theme emerged: Wisconsin's continued economic growth



COMPETITIVE WISCONSIN

depends on its ability to balance energy reliability, affordability, sustainability and infrastructure development.

In "It's All About the Balance," former Wisconsin Technology Council President Tom Still summarized the challenge facing policymakers and utilities alike. Every major electricity generation source (e.g., natural gas, solar, wind, hydroelectric, biomass, and nuclear power) has advantages and drawbacks. Regardless, electricity demand is rapidly accelerating.

In “The Coming Surge,” former Wisconsin State Journal editor John Smalley explored what is on the horizon. For much of the past two decades, electricity demand has remained relatively flat in the state due to energy-efficiency improvements, growth in renewable energy, and the overall decline of manufacturing. “That’s about to change radically,” said Todd Stuart, executive director of the Wisconsin Industrial Energy Group.

The Wisconsin Public Service Commission projects that the state’s peak electricity demand will rise in the coming years, making long-term planning increasingly important. As demand grows, utilities, regulators, businesses and consumers will need to collaborate to address the affordability challenges of maintaining a reliable and modern energy system.

Part of the growth is driven by large-scale data centers, but increased industrial energy use, the adoption of electric vehicles, and the growing number of devices and systems connected to the grid are all contributing to greater consumption.

Meeting that demand requires more than simply building additional generation facilities. It also requires modernizing and expanding the transmission network that delivers electricity from its source to the consumer.

Alliant Energy President and CEO Lisa Barton compared the transmission system to the nation’s highway network. Just as roads connect communities and commerce, transmission lines connect energy resources to homes, businesses and industries over hundreds of miles. Maintaining a reliable grid requires continual investment and planning in new routes, upgrades, maintenance and capacity improvements.

That planning can become complicated. Some stakeholders may support the development of wind and solar generation but oppose the transmission projects needed to

The Wisconsin Public Service Commission projects that the state’s peak electricity demand will rise in the coming years, making long-term planning increasingly important.



Photo credit: Dairyland Power Cooperative

move the energy generated across the state. The challenge, experts argue, is finding a balance that allows Wisconsin to meet its energy goals while maintaining reliability and affordability and minimizing environmental impacts.

In “Reliability and Meeting Increased Demand,” WisPolitics.com President Jeff Mayers summarized a discussion among utility leaders on Wisconsin’s growing energy needs and the likely role of data centers.

Utility executives generally expressed support for attracting data centers to Wisconsin, viewing them as critical infrastructure in an increasingly digital economy.

“We want to win the AI race; we need to have this technology under our control,” said Barton.

Madison Gas and Electric Chair, President and CEO Jeff Keebler agreed, noting that data centers already support much of modern life. “It’s the data center’s computing power that allows us to have the digitally integrated lives we all live,” Keebler said. “I personally would rather have them in our backyard where we can control and help plant the seed of how they operate, than just leave it up to someone else.”

Continued on page 22

Continued from page 21

Others emphasized the need for a comprehensive strategy. Brent Ridge, president and CEO of Dairyland Power Cooperative, called for a balanced approach that includes investments in generation, transmission and energy storage.

In “Turning It Up: Consumer Reliance on Digitized Information and the Role of Data Centers,” Competitive Wisconsin argued that data centers are becoming essential infrastructure for storing and processing information and for enabling smarter, more resilient energy systems.

While data centers have been around for years, the recent boom has made the public increasingly concerned about the environmental impacts, particularly their energy consumption and water use, and the potential effects on utility costs. While some newer facilities use

closed-loop cooling systems that significantly reduce water consumption, those systems often require additional electricity.

Environmental advocates say many questions remain unanswered because the full energy and water needs of proposed projects are not yet known.

At the same time, supporters point to the economic benefits data centers can bring. Tom Still noted that major facilities often create a “clustering effect,” creating construction, management and technology jobs. A PricewaterhouseCoopers analysis found that Wisconsin’s data centers supported more than 47,000 jobs and generated about \$670 million in state tax revenue in 2023.

Teresa Mogensen, chair, president and CEO of American Transmission Co., described today’s energy transformation as the successor to the Industrial Revolution, driven by

**As demand grows,
utilities, regulators,
businesses and consumers will
need to collaborate to address
the affordability challenges of
maintaining a reliable and
modern energy system.**

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unprecedented digital demand and requiring urgent action.

As older power plants retire and demand rises, utilities face mounting pressure to develop new energy-generating facilities and expand transmission capacity. However, infrastructure requires significant investment, and those costs ultimately flow through to residential and commercial ratepayers.

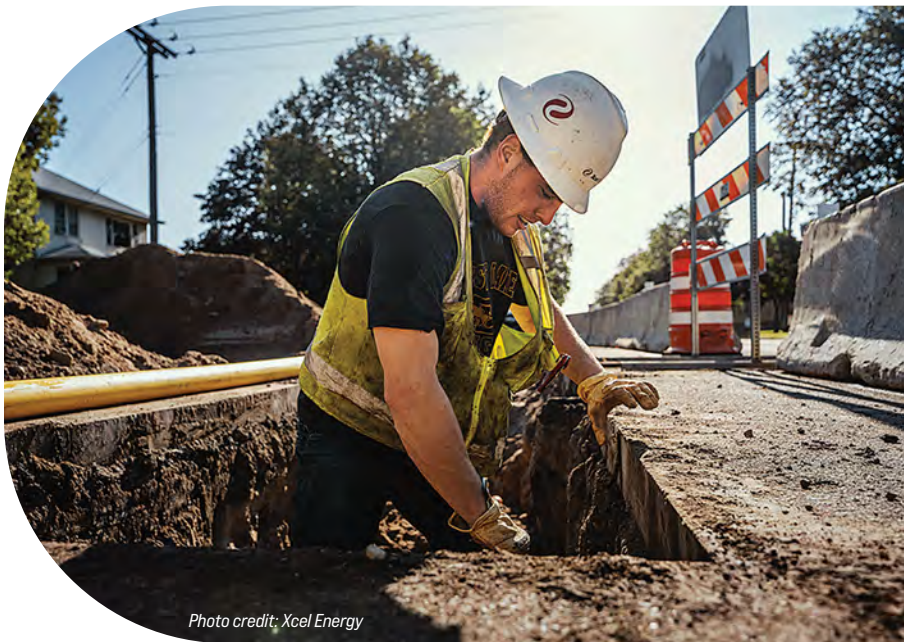
One area where utility leaders see room for improvement is permitting and siting. They argue that many of the processes governing major infrastructure projects were developed decades ago and are not designed for the pace and scale of today's energy transition. They are calling for greater alignment among regulators, utilities and stakeholders to streamline reviews while maintaining appropriate oversight.

In "The Permitting Process," former UW-Stout communications director and Eau Claire Leader-Telegram editor Doug Mell examined a recent Western Wisconsin transmission line project as an example of the extensive review required before new infrastructure can be built. Determining need, evaluating routes, assessing environmental impacts, conducting public engagement, and securing regulatory approvals are all part of a process designed to ensure that decisions about major energy investments are made carefully and thoughtfully.

Taken together, the "Leadership Briefing Series: Energy" makes it clear that demand is rising, technology is evolving, and the infrastructure powering homes, businesses, and communities must evolve as well.

The decisions made today on generation, transmission, permitting and investment will shape not only how Wisconsin powers its economy but also how successfully it competes in an increasingly digital and energy-dependent world. The challenge ahead is not choosing among reliability, affordability, sustainability or growth — it is finding the balance that allows Wisconsin to achieve all four. ■

Competitive Wisconsin, Inc. is a unique nonpartisan coalition that engages business, education, agriculture and labor in strategic collaborations dedicated to strengthening and growing the Wisconsin economy. WCA President and CEO Mark O'Connell serves as co-chair of Competitive Wisconsin.



To read the full "Leadership Briefing Series: Energy," visit competitivewi.com.

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Leading Wisconsin's Courts

A CONVERSATION WITH CHIEF JUSTICE JILL KAROFKY

Long before she became chief justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, Jill Karofsky watched public service unfold at the family dinner table.

Her mother served on the Middleton City Council and later became one of Wisconsin's first female mayors, dedicating years, even in retirement, to improving public transportation, emergency medical services, housing, and senior care. Seeing that focus on community institutions up close left a lasting impression on Karofsky and helped shape the career that would eventually lead her to the state's highest court.

"My mom has had the greatest influence on my career path," she explained. "I learned early on that public service is about people, not abstract ideas."

Karofsky grew up in Dane County, attending Middleton public schools before leaving Wisconsin to attend Duke

University. She later returned, earning both a law degree and a master's degree in public affairs from UW-Madison.

Her early legal career centered on helping crime victims. After law school, she joined the Dane County District Attorney's Office, where she served as both an assistant district attorney and a deputy district attorney. For nearly 10 years, she specialized in prosecuting cases involving women and children victims.

The work, she said, reinforced her belief that the justice system has the power to create meaningful change in people's lives. "The law can be an incredibly effective vehicle to effectuate positive change for real people," she said.

After a stint serving as general counsel for the National Conference of Bar Examiners, Karofsky joined the Wisconsin Department of Justice as an assistant attorney general. She became Wisconsin's first Violence Against

“Courts are not abstract institutions. They are places where real people come with real problems, often at some of the most difficult moments of their lives.”

Women Resource prosecutor and later led the state Office of Crime Victim Services.

In 2017, voters elected her to the Dane County Circuit Court bench. Three years later, she won election to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, and in 2025, her fellow justices selected her to serve as chief justice. “My first anniversary in that role was July 1,” she said.

Karofsky said one of the biggest misconceptions about the chief justice’s role is that the position revolves solely around Supreme Court decisions. “I join my colleagues as an equal partner in deciding the cases that come before us, but the chief justice and the Supreme Court are also responsible for administering the entire judicial branch of the state,” she said.

That responsibility includes providing training and education to the hundreds of judges serving in municipal, circuit and court of appeals courts, as well as the Supreme Court. They also support court staff and clerks throughout the state, supervise the state budget for courts, and oversee the Lavinia Goodell State Law Library, its satellite libraries, and the Circuit Court Access Program, or CCAP, which Karofsky commended for allowing “accessibility to almost every court hearing in the state.”

In addition to the daily administrative work, Karofsky explained that she works with other leaders at the local, county and state levels to ensure the court system has the resources it needs.

“I often describe the role as part jurist, part administrator, and part advocate for the court system,” she said. For her, the goal is the same in each role: fair, efficient and accessible courts that support the constitution and are trusted by the people they serve.

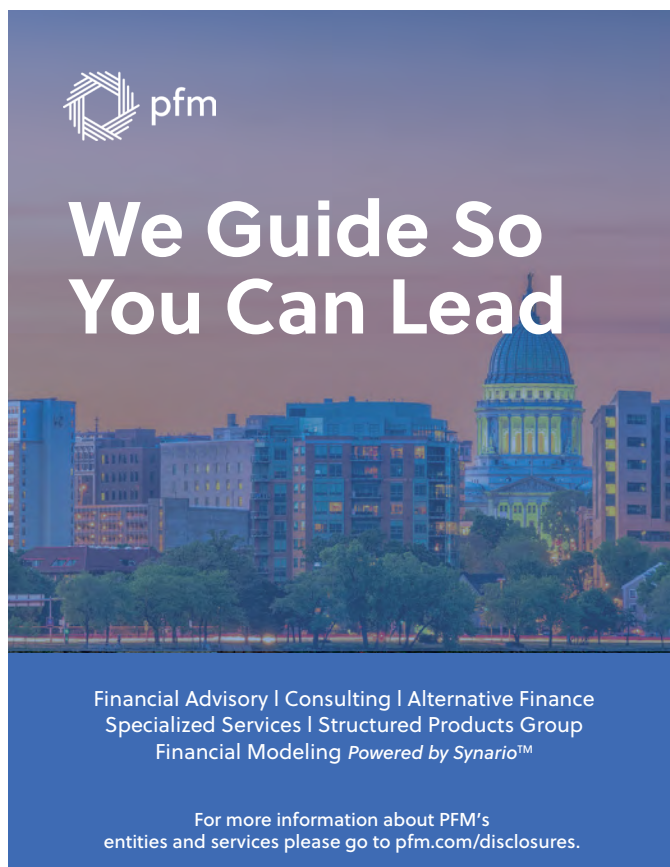
“Courts are not abstract institutions. They are places where real people come with real problems, often at some of the most difficult moments of their lives. Every day, courts handle issues involving family stability, public safety, housing, mental health and individual rights,” explained Karofsky.

She emphasized that the judicial branch is designed to be independent, so that decisions are based on the law and the facts, not on politics or public pressure. That independence is essential to fairness.

“At the same time, courts are deeply connected to their communities. They rely on strong relationships with local officials, service providers, and community partners to function effectively,” Karofsky said. “When people understand both the independence of the courts and the human impact of court decisions, they can better picture why this work matters.”

That understanding, she added, has become even more important during a period of growing political division and heightened public scrutiny of government institutions.

Continued on page 26



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“I continue to be impressed by the professionalism and dedication of judges, clerks, court reporters, interpreters, bailiffs and court staff across Wisconsin. Many work under significant pressure and with limited resources, yet they approach their responsibilities with care and a strong sense of duty.”

Continued from page 25

“We are currently living in a tumultuous moment of history where our democratic structures are being challenged to an extent that I certainly have not seen in my lifetime,” she said. “We are more polarized, and political violence is on the rise.”

At times like these, Karofsky said, people look to the courts to protect their rights and freedoms and for justice. “It’s our job to make sure they can find it. That means it’s important that we maintain the public’s confidence by rooting our decisions in the rule of law and by treating those who come before us with fairness, dignity, respect and empathy.”

Despite the challenges facing the judicial system,

Karofsky said she remains encouraged by the people working within it every day.

“I continue to be impressed by the professionalism and dedication of judges, clerks, court reporters, interpreters, bailiffs and court staff across Wisconsin,” she said. “Many work under significant pressure and with limited resources, yet they approach their responsibilities with care and a strong sense of duty.”

She also pointed to innovation happening in courts, particularly at the local level. “Courts across the state are finding practical ways to improve access to justice, strengthen problem-solving courts, and meet the needs of their communities,” she said. “Much of that work happens outside the spotlight, but it has a real impact.”

One of the most important strengths of Wisconsin’s court system, Karofsky said, is partnership. She explained that counties play a central role in supporting local courts, and that collaboration between state and local leaders is essential to ensuring courts function effectively.

“I have deep respect for the work county officials do every day to support court operations and their communities. When we work together with shared purpose and mutual respect, the justice system can meet the needs of communities across Wisconsin,” she said.

Outside the courtroom, Karofsky said she values spending time with family and friends and taking advantage of Wisconsin’s outdoors. “I love running, biking and hiking,” she said. “I also love cheering on Wisconsin’s sports teams, including the Packers, the Bucks, the Brewers and the Badgers.”

With her interests outside of work helping to keep her grounded, Karofsky’s approach to leadership remains rooted in a simple principle she learned at the family dinner table decades ago: “It is about showing up, doing the work, and trying to make systems function more fairly and effectively.” ■

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Youth in Governance participants at the
WCA 2026 Legislative Conference

Strengthening Civic Health Through Youth Voice

YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE AND THE WISCONSIN COMMUNITY YOUTH CORPS

By Deilee Calvert, Communications Manager, UW-Madison Extension

High school student Ignacio Tellez does not consider himself a future leader; he's a leader now. "The verbiage that we use to describe youth as future leaders of tomorrow, that's holding us back, like we're gonna be there one day. But in reality, we're leaders of today," said Tellez. As part of Racine County's Youth in Governance program, Tellez is learning how county government functions and about issues facing his community. He attends the Human and Health Development Committee meeting each month, where he shares his perspective.

Racine is one of eight Wisconsin counties that sponsor a Youth in Governance program facilitated by UW-Madison Extension. In those counties, youth are appointed to serve as voting members (non-binding) on the county board or its committees to share their views and suggestions on current issues. County supervisors and staff serve as mentors to youth participants, providing encouragement and answering questions they might have. Extension educators provide orientation, administrative support, and ongoing learning and leadership opportunities for participants.

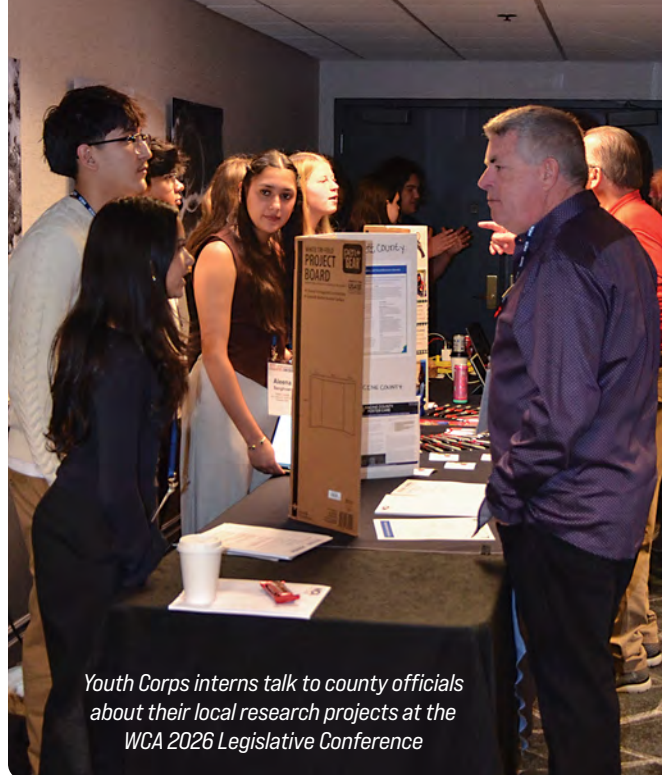
► Taking leadership to the next level

Tellez wanted to take his experience a step further, so he joined the Wisconsin Community Youth Corps, a new internship program for Youth in Governance participants. Funded by a two-year UW-Madison Reilly-Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Grant, Tellez and 11 other students are part of a pilot program focused on teaching them how to conduct community-based research and produce videos that share their perspectives.

Matt Calvert, Extension specialist and professor in the School of Human Ecology, and Neil Klemme, Iron County 4-H youth development educator, worked with a team of UW-Madison educators to apply for the grant. “Through Youth in Governance, we see that students who are engaged in government want to do more, but they’re not sure how,” said Calvert. “This is a great opportunity to help them gain those skills and provide a supportive space for them to practice.”

The project teaches the youth interns about public policy and community development, equipping them with the skills to tackle challenges they identify in their communities. The students presented research findings and video projects at the WCA Legislative Conference in February and to local county leaders in May. (To view the final research posters and watch video projects, visit go.wisc.edu/Youth-Corps.)

It’s not just about learning new skills. Through Youth Corps, Aleena Sanghvan, an intern in Dane County’s Youth in Governance program, has connected with other youth leaders across the state. Brainstorming and collaborating



Youth Corps interns talk to county officials about their local research projects at the WCA 2026 Legislative Conference

have helped her find like-minded peers. “One of the best things is getting to know other people who also want to make a difference in society. Because there’s this feeling you get when you’re working with other people, and they have the same goal as you, and they want to see your community thrive and flourish.” That feeling, says Sanghvan, motivates her to be active in her community.

► Appreciating the role of local government

Triya Kalidindi, a Youth Corps intern in Racine County, used to pay more attention to state and national news, but now she understands how local policy directly impacts her life. “When I joined Youth in Governance, I think it

Continued on page 30

IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

As part of their internship, some Youth Corps interns conducted local research and shared the findings with their county boards.

Gabrielle Crandall BURNETT COUNTY

“When youth value nature, they are more likely to participate in conservation efforts now and in the future. As the Burnett County research intern, I researched youth and natural resources education at Crex Meadows, a local wildlife refuge. I explored the question, “How do local youths’ knowledge of and opportunities to learn about Crex Meadows relate to their value of natural resources?” Survey results showed that youth who knew more about Crex Meadows valued natural resources more, illustrating the importance of educational nature conservation programs for youth.”

IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

Aleena Sanghvan and Ishaan Shukla DANE COUNTY

"Adolescents are facing a mental health crisis, leading to an increase in risky behaviors. According to data, including the Dane County Youth Assessment, there is a correlation between adolescents' psychological well-being and family economic stress. When students take on parental roles at home, their core childhood experiences, academics, and mental health can suffer. We are gathering data from various Dane County school districts to better understand trends in risk behaviors associated with family financial stress and to promote an effective solution for individuals battling these struggles alone."

Natalie Cane and Kasey Klemme IRON COUNTY

"Rural communities are struggling to attract and retain residents. We felt that one of the reasons for this in our community is the lack of art. Art can have benefits to mental health and send a message that we care about our community. It can teach visitors about our history and what makes our community unique. We conducted a survey of middle and high school students, asking what kind of art they would like to see. Results showed more live music and murals. We also asked the elementary school to draw a picture of what they would like to see on a mural in the town."

Continued from page 29

really put a face, a name and a relationship to all the laws, ordinances, and all of that getting put in place in my town. I think it also made everything the county board does a little bigger in my eyes — being a part of the process, discussing with everyone, just as they're about to make a decision. Through that, I've found how large and how big of a deal even the smallest ordinances or laws can be, and how they can affect my life."

Participation in Youth in Governance increases participants' willingness to take an active role in local government. That has long-term benefits for counties thinking about who will fill government roles in the future. "The experience in this program has strengthened

my love for the state, and being involved has been fulfilling. I could definitely see myself working at the Capitol, or just in my county, coming back and paying it forward as well," said Tellez.

► Leading today and tomorrow

Sanghvan says she is empowered by the experience, noting that if something in her community doesn't work, she realizes that she can do something about it. When Youth in Governance members see themselves as part of their community's future, it increases the likelihood that, as adults, they will stay in the area or return to put down roots.

While Youth in Governance and the Youth Corps are most often associated with county government, Klemme

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Triya Kalidindi and Ignacio Tellez RACINE COUNTY

"After touring the Jonathon Delagrave Care Center, we noticed how youth rehabilitative practices were evolving. We decided to assess how our community's youth perceived how a traditional system like foster care serves youth in today's world. We determined through a survey that the youth of Racine County had little to no awareness of the system, yet they were willing to work toward improving the services it provides. The Racine Youth in Governance cohort identified one long-lasting action we could take: We acquired funds to improve the family visitation room and presented our research and renovation proposal to the county."

To see all of the
research and video
projects completed
this year, visit
go.wisc.edu/Youth-Corps

has found more opportunities to get youth involved.

"In Iron County, youth serve on nonprofit boards and the county board, and have advised placemaking and economic development teams. By including youth in those spaces and in important discussions, communities benefit," he said.

During year two of the Youth Corps pilot, students from other counties with Youth in Governance programs will be

brought in, internship opportunities added and learning materials created that can be replicated when the pilot ends. In addition, Youth in Governance programs continue to be initiated in new counties, including Calumet County last year, where Extension has capacity in Positive Youth Development staffing. ■

Deilee Calvert is the communications manager for UW-Madison Extension.

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County Funding 101

County government in Wisconsin provides a wide range of services — everything from health and human services for those in need to county and state highway maintenance, parks and recreation, public safety, and so much more.

FUNDING SOURCES

Funding for these services comes from five main sources:

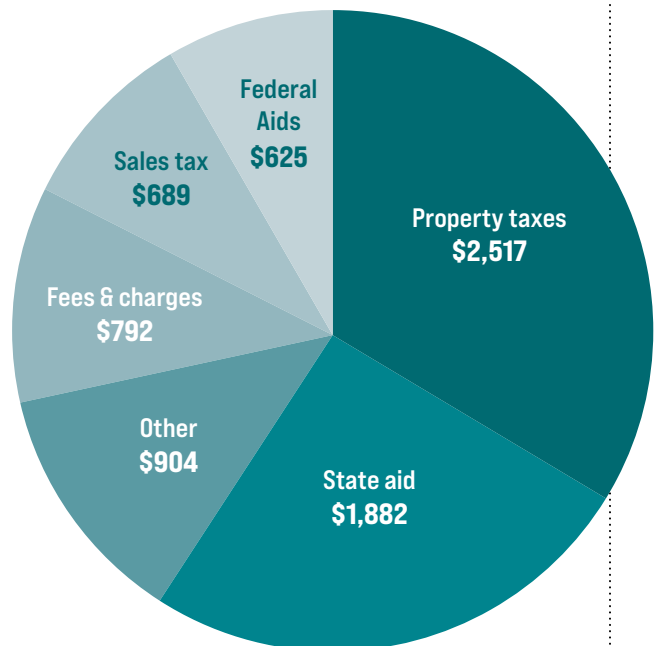
- Property taxes
- State aid
- Fees & charges
- Sales tax
- Federal aids

The main source is the property tax, accounting for 34% of revenue (about \$2.5 billion) in 2024, followed by state aids (including shared revenue), which accounted for about 25% (about \$1.9 billion).

Other than the property tax, counties have very few local revenue options to fund services mandated by the state. Counties are allowed to levy an optional 0.5% sales tax (except for Milwaukee County, which is allowed a 0.9% sales tax). In 2024, counties collected \$689 million in local sales taxes. Fees and charges for county services generated \$792 million. Other revenue streams, including opioid settlement funds and some intergovernmental transfers, accounted for \$904 million in total county funding.

2024 County Revenues

(in millions of dollars)



Source: Wisconsin Department of Revenue, County and Municipal Revenues and Expenditures

COUNTY SPENDING

In general, county revenue is used for:



Health and Human Services (33%)

Programs for veterans, child welfare, mental health, substance use, transportation and nutrition for the elderly



Public Safety (24%)

Law enforcement and operating county jails



General Government (17%)

Services provided by the register of deeds, operation of circuit courts, and general operations



Transportation (10%)

Repair and maintenance of county roads and bridges, maintenance of state roads, mass transit, airports and ports



Debt Service (6%)

Repayment of debt incurred to fund capital projects



Other (6%)

Other spending, such as intergovernmental transfers



Parks and Recreation (4%)

County parks, museums, cultural and community services and events

PROPERTY TAX LIMITS

While property tax is the largest revenue source

for Wisconsin counties, the amount counties can levy is limited by state law. The change in the county property tax levy is tied to the amount of net new construction occurring throughout the county. These limits were first implemented for property taxes levied in December 2005.

The minimum amount allowed was removed in 2010, effectively setting the minimum allowable levy increase at 0%.

There are exceptions to the limit, such as debt service. If a county borrows for a capital project, the property taxes required to repay the loan are generally exempt from the limits.

SINCE 2010

Statewide, net new construction has averaged 1.3% per year.

In individual counties, net new construction has averaged between 0.5% and 2% per year.

MORE INFORMATION...

For more information about property taxes and county funding, and many other challenges facing Wisconsin and its counties, visit forward-analytics.net.

For specific county-level data, see the annual book of county facts published by Forward Analytics at forward-analytics.net/the-green-book.





The Cove Guest House in Pierce County was featured in season four's "Reviving Prescott's Hidden Gems."

UNIQUELY WISCONSIN

Storytelling as Economic Development

By Michelle Gormican Thompson, Thompson Communications

We talk about this all the time: "What makes Wisconsin, well, Wisconsin?"

For many, the answer is easy and comes quickly, whether it's a Friday fish fry, the Green Bay Packers (of course), dairy farms led by the third generation of family members, ice fishing in February, or cookouts in July. But ask the same question in each of Wisconsin's 72 counties, and the answers become far more personal and far more diverse.



It was this idea that became the impetus and heart of Uniquely Wisconsin, a collaborative initiative launched in 2021 by the Wisconsin Counties Association and Discover Mediaworks. It was the goal to help counties tell their stories through compelling, professionally produced

digital video content with statewide reach.

The stories shared through Uniquely Wisconsin are not always easily defined. They are more than a tourism campaign and run deeper than an economic development

To see stories from the first four 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 and CEO Mark O'Connell or WCA Communications Consultant Michelle Gormican Thompson at 866-404-2700.

initiative. For those counties involved in Uniquely Wisconsin, the project celebrates the people, places and traditions that define each county while illustrating how those individual stories combine to tell Wisconsin's larger and fascinating story.

"Wisconsin is rich with traditions, landmarks and gorgeous natural resources, and after four seasons of Uniquely Wisconsin, we have been able to showcase what this state really is about: its people," said WCA President and CEO Mark D. O'Connell. "We are honored to be a part of this program and thrilled by the impact counties have seen by joining together to highlight and promote the incredible stories of our state."

The program has become one of the WCA's most successful outreach efforts, giving counties an opportunity to showcase what makes them exceptional while reaching audiences far beyond traditional tourism marketing.

With 21 counties participating in the first four seasons and five counties participating in each of the next two seasons, the three-time Emmy Award-winning initiative has been incredibly effective in telling the county story.

► **Storytelling as economic development**

Communities today compete not only for visitors, but also for businesses, skilled workers and families deciding where to live and build careers. Authentic storytelling helps people understand a community beyond population figures or economic statistics.

"As a part of the Discover Mediaworks family of programming, the Uniquely Wisconsin brand highlights our state's greatest resource: its people," said Mark C. Rose, president and CEO of Discover Mediaworks. "It also serves as a powerful driver to bring people to a county, for a day, a week or longer. This brand has become an essential tool for economic development, workforce recruitment and community engagement, and we are incredibly proud of this reach and impact."

As a member of the Uniquely Wisconsin initiative, counties receive a comprehensive marketing partnership designed to elevate the county's visibility and create lasting promotional assets.

The videos become powerful economic development tools that can be used to attract businesses, recruit employees, encourage families to relocate, promote local events, highlight quality of life, and foster community pride. Uniquely Wisconsin counties use the content in presentations, on websites, across social media, during workforce recruitment efforts, and in conversations with prospective investors and community partners.

"We believe that Uniquely Wisconsin offers one of the strongest communications and marketing opportunities available for counties," said O'Connell. "For a modest investment, counties gain professionally produced storytelling, broad statewide exposure, evergreen marketing assets, and a trusted partnership dedicated to showcasing everything that makes the county unique. This is where the true magic of the program lies." ■

A stylized illustration of a city scene with a person on a bicycle in the foreground, a bus, and a car. In the background, there are buildings and a large water tower. The SEH logo is in the bottom right corner.

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August “In the Board Room” Webinar on Property Tax Collections and the Foreclosure Process

Have you ever found yourself wanting more information on the property tax collection and foreclosure process? You're not alone. Join us at noon on August 26 for the next session of “In the Board Room,” where the Attolles team and a special guest will discuss the process and review recent legislation and court

decisions that impact this important topic.

Recordings of all the webinars to date are available for members on the WCA website at wicounties.org.

To attend the live webinars, pre-registration at bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom26 is required to receive the webinar link. There is no cost to register. ■

Save the dates for upcoming webinars:

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

The Tipping Point: Manufacturing, Healthcare, and Two Decades of Economic Transformation

A report released by Forward Analytics in July finds that Wisconsin's workforce has reached a tipping point. For the first time, healthcare and social assistance professions have surpassed manufacturing as the state's largest employment sector. Following national trends, Wisconsin joins the 46 other states that have already made this transition.

The Forward Analytics report makes clear that the transition

from manufacturing to healthcare as Wisconsin's dominant employment sector reflects deep demographic forces rather than a simple industrial decline. Whether that transition strengthens or strains the state's economy will depend on the ability of workforce investment and wage growth to keep pace with the services required by an aging population.

Visit forward-analytics.net to read the full report. ■

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MONDAY, AUGUST 24
Barron County



**Norm-E-Lane at
Four Mile Creek Dairy**
Josh & Emmett Meissner
1272 7th Ave, Hillsdale, WI

TUESDAY, AUGUST 25
Clark County



Norm-E-Lane
Josh & Emmett Meissner
W267 Panther Creek Rd,
Chili, WI

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 26
Calumet County



Rivers Edge Dairy
Kurt & Tiffany Schneider;
Kory & Fallon Schneider
N3485 Church Rd,
Chilton, WI

THURSDAY, AUGUST 27
Dane County



Virhada Holsteins LLC
Virgil & Dawn Haag;
Karsen Bentley, Kody Haag
9158 Britt Valley Rd,
Mt. Horeb, WI



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REGISTRATION OPEN
State Humane Officer Training

SEPT. 21 – 25 | Madison

Humane officers are appointed by local jurisdictions, including counties, to investigate complaints of animal abuse and neglect; oversee cases that involve strays, bites, and hoarding; and assist in enforcing related local ordinances and state laws. Training is required for anyone serving as a humane officer in Wisconsin, and the training must be completed within one year of being appointed.

To provide the necessary skills, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection will host the 2026 Humane Officer Training Program on Sept. 21–25 at the DoubleTree by Hilton in Madison, in partnership with the University of Missouri Extension Law Enforcement Training Institute.

During the five-day training, veterinarians, attorneys and experienced law officers will teach courses on laws, search and seizure, investigating animal crimes, the link to domestic violence, evidence collection and documentation, forensics, and common animal husbandry practices. ■

► Visit bit.ly/Humane-Officer-Training to learn more and register.

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.

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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 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.

► KEYNOTE: Dr. Peter Cressy

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 and CEO of the Distilled Spirits Council trade association.

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

CONFERENCE WORKSHOP PREVIEW

The WCA Annual Conference offers nearly 30 workshops featuring presentations from industry experts and opinion leaders discussing timely issues facing Wisconsin counties.

Below is a sampling of planned workshops.

► **Alive In Your Purpose**

Discover the tools and skills you can incorporate into your personal and professional life to move beyond merely surviving to actually thriving in the face of adversity. Learn to appreciate and embrace not only the easy or the pleasant but also the struggle. Understand the need for balance in maintaining holistic wellness.

Kewaunee County Sheriff's Department

► **Effective Media Relations in Local Government**

Do you want to communicate clearly, confidently and credibly with the media? This session covers core principles of media engagement, including message development, interview preparation, responding during high-profile situations, and maintaining public trust. Attendees will learn practical strategies for staying on message, handling difficult questions, and representing their organization professionally.

Waukesha County

► **Ensuring the Biggest Bang for Your County Buck**

Wisconsin law requires counties to solicit bids for certain projects and award a contract to the lowest responsible bidder. While not legally required, a bid or RFP process would be helpful in other contracts. Join us to explore the legal requirements for bidding and practical ways an RFP process can ensure your county gets the most bang for its buck!

Attolles Law, s.c.; Barron County

► **Increasing Transparency and Building Trust Through Open Data**

Residents increasingly expect government information to be available, accessible and easy to understand. Learn about Marathon County's journey to develop

an Open Data Portal that provides meaningful, public-facing access to data. We will explore how the county is using open data to improve transparency, strengthen accountability, and build trust while fostering a culture of data-driven decision-making. Presenters will provide practical lessons and strategies that counties of any size can use to meet the evolving expectations of the communities they serve.

Marathon County

► **Juvenile Corrections: A Status Update**

The presentation will discuss the current status of juvenile corrections in the state. It will include updates on the state-run Type 1 facilities, the Secure Residential Care Centers for Youth, and their funding.

Wisconsin Division of Juvenile Corrections

► **Leading Through Disaster: Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities Before, During and After an Emergency**

This session will explore the duties and roles of emergency management. The presenters will also expand on the roles and responsibilities of local elected officials before, during and after an emergency or disaster.

*Wisconsin Emergency Management Association;
Jefferson County*

► **Maximizing Potential Levy Limit Strategies**

In an era of increasing demand for services and limited budgetary resources, counties must explore all options in financing their operations. Understanding what does or does not fall within the levy limits is an important step in developing financial strategies. This session will explore the rules and statutes governing a county's levy authority and equip attendees with tools to create a path to financial sustainability.

Attolles Law, s.c.

CONFERENCE WORKSHOP PREVIEW *CONTINUED*

► **Regular Meeting of the Nisnocsiiw County Board of Supervisors**

The Nisnocsiiw Board of Supervisors meets every two years at the WCA Annual Conference to engage in all sorts of business. But the question is whether this “mock” meeting will go according to plan or whether there will be mistakes in parliamentary procedure. Join us for a real-world session on Robert’s Rules at work, designed to highlight issues that your county can avoid at its meetings.

Attolles Law, s.c.; Jefferson County

► **Solar, Wind, BESS and Data Centers: The County Role**

Wisconsin is experiencing a tremendous rise in renewable energy projects. While counties play a

limited role in regulating many of these projects, they nonetheless retain authority over certain aspects of them. This session will explore the legal framework of regulating solar, wind and battery storage projects.

Attolles Law, s.c.

► **Using Sales Tax to Build More**

Dodge County needed to be proactive to grow and sustain a county that supports its businesses, communities, residents, and future workforce. To that end, the Dodge County Community Development Fund was created using county sales tax dollars to provide financial resources and partner with communities in new and innovative ways to support business and housing developments and to build community assets.

Dodge County

For the full list of workshops, visit wicounties.org/conference.

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Congress Approves Landmark Housing Reform Bill

Adapted from an article by Jared Grigas, Associate Legislative Director, Community, Economic & Workforce Development, and Kevin Moore, Legislative Assistant, National Association of Counties

In June, following nearly a year of negotiations, Congress passed a historic housing reform package, the 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act. However, after initially signaling that he would promptly sign the bill, President Donald Trump has said he will not do so until the Senate passes the SAVE America Act, a separate bill that overhauls election regulations.

[Editor's note: As this issue of Wisconsin Counties goes to print, the deadline for the president to sign or veto the 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act is expiring. If the president does not act, it becomes law. If he vetoes the bill, there may be enough votes in Congress to override his veto, given that it passed both houses with overwhelming support.]

If enacted, the final version of the housing reform bill will meet several National Association of Counties advocacy priorities, including increased safeguards for critical community development funding and an expedited process for allocating disaster recovery funds.

► Streamlined access to critical disaster recovery funding

The bill authorizes the Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program for three years, enabling timelier access to disaster recovery funding. Under current law, CDBG-DR lacks standing authorization or an annual budget and is instead appropriated on a case-by-case basis after qualifying disaster events. This often leads to funding delays of a year or more while Congress evaluates impacts and negotiates funding levels.

CDBG-DR funds are particularly important for long-term housing recovery, infrastructure restoration, and economic



revitalization, complementing the more immediate recovery objectives of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's core programs. With a three-year standing authorization, impacted counties will be able to access funds and begin rebuilding and restoring economic activity much sooner.

► Commonsense exemptions under "Build Now"

A provision carried over from earlier Senate versions of the legislation, known as the Build Now Act, ties Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding to local housing production. Under the framework, a portion of funding for CDBG recipients that don't meet certain housing performance thresholds would be redirected to "higher-performing" communities.

Counties have expressed concerns that unpredictable funding shifts could undermine long-term community development planning and make it harder to leverage CDBG investments for multiyear housing, infrastructure and economic development projects.

The final bill includes several exemptions that are expected to significantly narrow the pool of CDBG recipients affected by the Build Now Act.

- An expanded emergency lookahead that exempts any community that has been subject to a major disaster or emergency declaration in the preceding three years
- Supply and demand exemptions for communities that fall below specified housing or rental cost thresholds or exceed the national median vacancy rate
- Zoning exemptions for grantees with limited legal authority to influence zoning or land use within their community

The language also includes a three-year glide path (meaning this provision would not take effect until 2029) and a requirement that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development annually notify CDBG grantees of their eligibility and funding status.

► **Expanded uses and versatility for the HOME program**

The bill raises the income eligibility for Home Investment Partnerships (HOME) projects, enabling counties to better address gaps in workforce-level housing. To reduce administrative barriers and streamline construction, it also exempts certain low-impact rehabilitation and infill projects from full National Environmental Policy Act environmental impact reviews. Lastly, it allows grantees that do not also receive CDBG entitlement funds to use HOME funds for housing-adjacent infrastructure.

► **Compromise language on institutional investors**

The bill addresses large institutional investor activity in the housing market, striking a compromise between the two chambers' prior provisions. "Large institutional investors" would be prohibited from owning or exercising financial or fiduciary control over more than 350 single-family homes.

A prior version of the language would have exempted dedicated "built-to-rent" (BTR) properties from the 350-unit cap; however, investors would have been required to divest any BTR properties within seven years of acquisition (plus a possible three-year tenant opt-in). Counties expressed concern that this could unintentionally discourage large-scale rental projects that would expand the housing supply in local communities. Additionally, the forced sale of BTR properties may displace rental households who are unable to afford to purchase their units. This provision was ultimately removed following broad stakeholder pushback.

► **Unlocks financing tools for affordable housing and community development**

The bill raises banks' public welfare investment cap from 15% to 20% of their total capital. The cap limits how much a bank can invest in certain projects that support low-income communities, helping ensure banks remain solvent. However, many banks are approaching their 15% cap, limiting access to key housing finance tools such as the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit. Raising the cap to 20% would free up new private investment for affordable housing and community development projects. ■

Baldwin Introduces Bipartisan Legislation to Help Volunteer First Responders Access Affordable Housing

Adapted from an article by NACo staff

Counties are on the front lines of emergency response, especially in rural communities, where volunteer first responders play a vital role in protecting residents and saving lives.

In June, U.S. Sens. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.) and Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.) reintroduced the Volunteer First Responder Housing Act (S. 4737). The bipartisan legislation would help qualified volunteer first responders access affordable housing.

The bill broadens eligibility for U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development rural housing loans by

allowing qualified volunteer emergency responders to participate in the Single Family Housing Guaranteed Loan Program, even if their income exceeds the program's income limit by up to \$18,000.

It also extends eligibility for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Good Neighbor Next Door program to volunteer emergency responders, allowing them to purchase homes in designated revitalization areas at a 50% discount off the list price.

S. 4737 has been referred to the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. ■



LEGAL ISSUES
RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

An Update on PFAS Laws and Litigation

By Andy Phillips and Evan Claditis, Attorneys, Attolles Law, s.c.

Federal and state governments have responded aggressively to growing PFAS concerns. In April 2024, following decades of legal challenges from PFAS manufacturers, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency adopted the first nationwide drinking water standards regulating six PFAS compounds and establishing maximum contaminant levels of 4.0 parts per trillion (ppt) for both PFOA and PFOS. Wisconsin subsequently updated its own drinking water standards to align with the new federal regulations pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 281.17, which authorizes the Department of Natural Resources to administer a statewide drinking water program that meets or exceeds federal standards under the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Recognizing that compliance with these stricter standards would require substantial financial resources, the Wisconsin Legislature enacted 2025 Wisconsin Acts 200 and 201 to help combat PFAS contamination across the state. Together, these companion laws appropriate more than \$133 million from Wisconsin's PFAS Trust Fund to help local governments, private well owners, airports and industrial facilities investigate contamination, improve water infrastructure and undertake remediation efforts. The legislation also created several grant programs specifically designed to assist communities affected by PFAS contamination.

Wisconsin is also focused on preventing future contamination. Because aqueous film-forming foam used to control fires has historically been one of the most

significant sources of PFAS contamination in drinking water, Wis. Stat. § 299.48 prohibits the use of Class B and Class A/B firefighting foams containing intentionally added PFAS except during emergency firefighting operations, or for certain testing purposes after strict containment, treatment, and disposal or storage measures have been implemented to prevent discharge of PFAS into the environment. The use of Class B firefighting foams containing intentionally added PFAS is expressly prohibited for training exercises.

The state of Wisconsin, and many Wisconsin counties, cities and villages have already joined the multidistrict litigation, with more municipalities swelling the plaintiffs' ranks every day.

Regulatory reforms have been accompanied by extensive nationwide litigation. Thousands of lawsuits brought by municipalities and public water systems, private property owners, state governments, and individuals claiming personal injuries from PFAS exposure have been consolidated in multidistrict litigation pending before Judge Richard Gergel in the U.S. District Court for the District of South Carolina. Multidistrict litigations establish a highly coordinated and efficient framework to resolve complex cases that share common defendants and common questions of fact. By centralizing discovery and pretrial procedures, multidistrict litigations conserve valuable time and resources while preventing duplicative work and inconsistent judicial rulings.

Given the sheer volume of claims continually joining the PFAS litigation, Gergel structured it into sequential

Continued on page 46



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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.

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LEGAL ISSUES

PFAS chemical manufacturers agreed to pay over \$12 billion in damages, comprising the largest drinking water contamination settlements in United States history. These multibillion-dollar settlements will help fund drinking water treatment and environmental remediation projects across the country.

Continued from page 44

bellwether programs to systematically manage three different categories of plaintiffs: water, personal injury, and soil. The common allegation running through each is that chemical manufacturers, including 3M and DuPont, designed, produced, marketed and sold PFAS-laden products despite knowing the long-term environmental consequences of these toxic chemicals.

The first category, now functionally complete, involved public water systems. Gergel recognized that municipal water contamination posed the most immediate public health threat and would be addressed first. PFAS chemical manufacturers agreed to pay over \$12 billion in damages, comprising the largest drinking water contamination settlements in United States history. These multibillion-dollar settlements will help fund drinking water treatment and environmental remediation projects across the country.

The second category, which is currently active, involves bodily injury claims targeting PFAS-linked illnesses like thyroid disease and kidney and testicular cancers. The third category, which is expected to emerge next, will involve

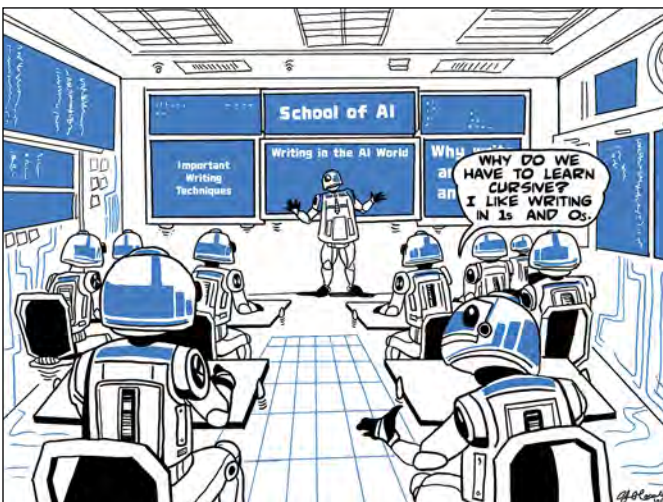
soil and property damage. It will focus on recovering the immense costs needed to excavate and remediate contaminated ground at sites like county airports and landfills. The chemical manufacturers will be confronted with allegations, including the defective design of their hazardous firefighting foams and their failure to warn users of the human health and environmental dangers inherent in handling PFOA and PFOS. The state of Wisconsin, and many Wisconsin counties, cities and villages have already joined the multidistrict litigation, with more municipalities swelling the plaintiffs' ranks every day.

► Conclusion

Although PFAS contamination presents one of the most significant environmental challenges facing communities and county governments today, there is reason for cautious optimism. According to the DNR, approximately 2,000 public water systems have been tested statewide, and nearly 95% of Wisconsin's public water systems currently meet Wisconsin's new, more protective drinking water standards. Continued monitoring, scientific research, responsible regulation, legislative funding and environmental remediation will remain essential to reducing future exposure and ensuring that affected communities have the resources necessary to protect public health. ■

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. Wis. Stat. § 281.17 authorizes the DNR to establish, administer and maintain a statewide safe drinking water program that meets or exceeds federal EPA standards. Prior to the recent rule revisions, Wisconsin's drinking water enforcement standard for PFOA and PFOS was 70 ppt. Updated administrative rules now establish the more protective 4.0 ppt enforcement standard consistent with the EPA's safe drinking water standards. The Safe Drinking Water Act does not apply to private wells, although annual testing is encouraged, particularly where contamination is suspected.





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