



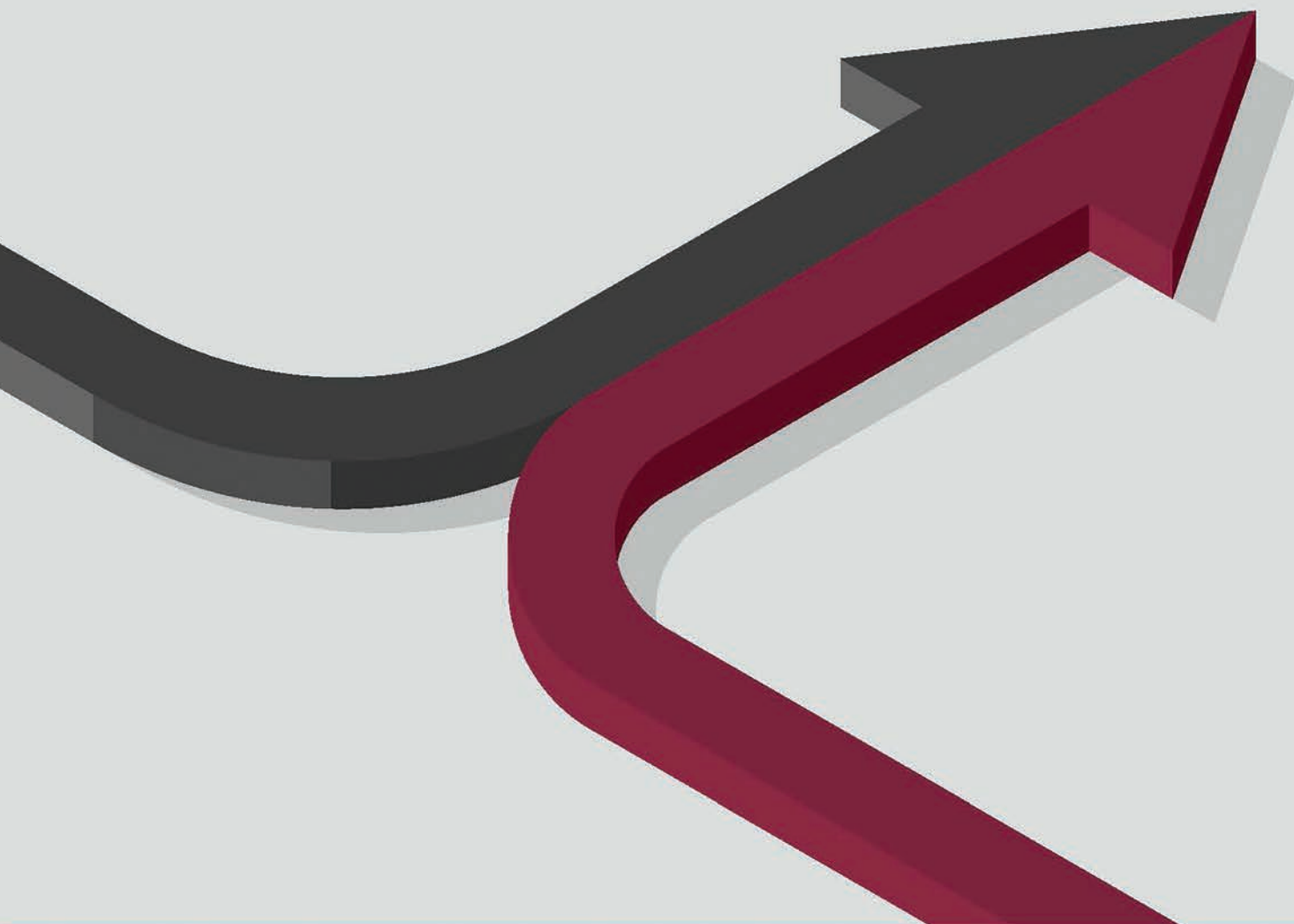
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OCTOBER 2026

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OCTOBER 2026

| Volume 90, Number 10



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From the President

Mark D. O'Connell

President & CEO

2026 Friend In and Of County Government

County government works best when people are willing to show up, speak up and do the work — often long before anyone notices.

At this year's WCA Annual Conference, we had the opportunity to recognize two individuals who exemplify that commitment in very different ways: Fond du Lac County Clerk Lisa Freiberg and Gov. Tony Evers, recipients of the WCA Friend In County Government and WCA Friend Of County Government awards.

Lisa Freiberg is a tremendous advocate for county clerks and the important work they do. She is also a familiar and trusted voice for the public, regularly using radio interviews to explain what is happening with elections and helping residents understand a process that can sometimes seem complicated and confusing.

That ability to explain government in terms people can understand is one of Lisa's greatest strengths. She doesn't simply look at legislation and ask what it says. She examines how it will affect counties, county clerks and the people they serve. She attends legislative hearings, follows the details and helps policymakers understand the practical implications of their decisions.

As anyone who has worked in county government knows, some of the most important work happens behind the scenes. It is the calls returned, the questions answered, the details checked, and the countless small things that keep government functioning. Lisa understands that work and consistently ensures the county perspective is heard.

Her leadership has also extended to the WCA Board of Directors, where she has brought the same commitment to service. She is always prepared, present and diligent in articulating the perspective of county clerks.

Gov. Tony Evers has likewise demonstrated a commitment to working with and understanding county government. During his tenure, his administration has recognized counties

as essential partners in translating state priorities into county services that reach people in communities across Wisconsin.

That partnership matters because counties put many of the decisions made in Madison and Washington into practice every day — administering programs, connecting residents to services, maintaining infrastructure, supporting public safety and health, and responding when communities face challenges.

Gov. Evers has been willing to engage with county leaders on the issues that matter most to them. He has recognized that policies developed at the state level can have very different consequences when they reach county highway departments, human services offices, public health departments, and courthouses.

Being a friend of county government does not mean agreeing on every issue. It means recognizing that Wisconsin is strongest when state and local governments understand their respective roles, listen to one another and work together to serve the public. We have valued our partnership over the last eight years with Gov. Evers and his willingness to actively participate with our association.

County government touches nearly every aspect of our residents' lives. But it takes dedicated people to make that government work. Some are elected officials. Some are employees. Some are advocates. And some are partners who understand that strong communities depend on strong county government.

The WCA Friend In County Government and WCA Friend Of County Government awards are our way of saying thank you to those who recognize that truth and put it into action.

Lisa Freiberg and Gov. Evers have each been friends of county government in their own way. We are grateful for their service, their partnership in public service, and, most importantly, their willingness to show up for Wisconsin's counties. ■

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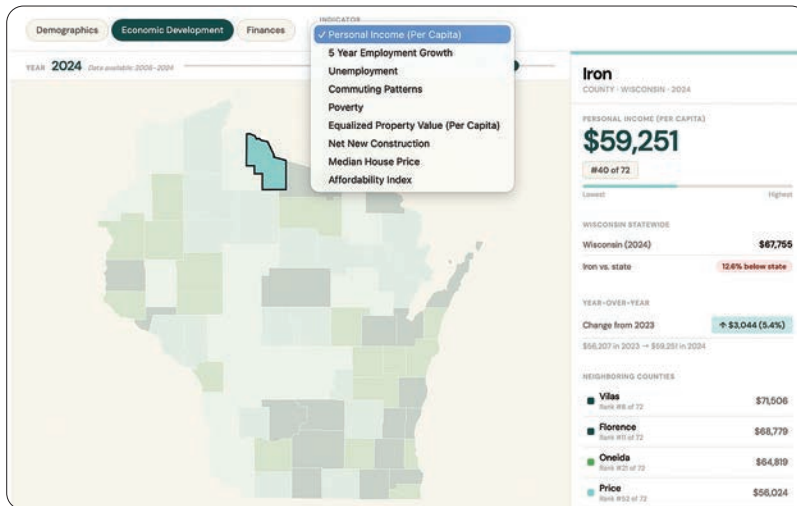
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On a desktop, use the County Data Explorer by selecting a county, choosing a category and a subset under the drop down menu, and then moving the slider to a specific year. The data for that county and its neighbors will appear.

Wisconsin County Data Explorer Debuts

Long-range strategic planning is essential for county governments to fulfill their mission effectively. As counties adapt to the evolving needs of residents, businesses and communities across the state, data plays an increasingly important role in informing decisions and shaping the future.

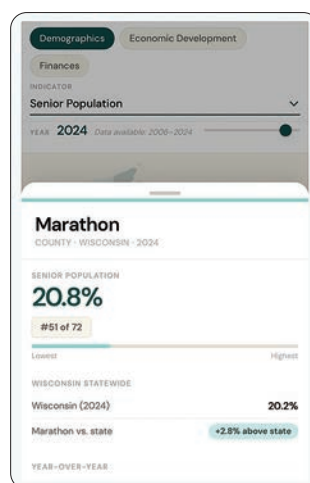
That's why Forward Analytics built the interactive Wisconsin County Data Explorer.

A companion to the Green Book, it works on any device, from desktop to phone, letting county leaders click through demographic, economic, and fiscal indicators for all 72 counties, compare against neighbors or the state, and track trends over time, wherever they are.

To access the online portal, visit forward-analytics.net/the-green-book. ■



On a phone or tablet, use the County Data Explorer by choosing a category and a subset under the drop down menu, moving the slider to a specific year, and then selecting the county. Scroll up or down on the screen that opens to view the data for that county and its neighbors.





Marquette Interchange in Milwaukee County



A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK:

Wisconsin's Network of Highways and Roads

By Collin Driscoll, Government Affairs Associate, Wisconsin Counties Association

When we think about transportation, many of us often think about getting into our four-door sedan or SUV and going to work, dropping kids off at school, or taking our elderly parents to appointments. Business owners and farmers may first think about delivery vans and trucks getting products to market, while county officials think about maintenance work and emergency response.

Regardless, there's one thing for certain: Roadways matter to all of us. Whether they are federal interstates designed for higher speeds and loads, state and county highways linking communities large and small, or local municipal roads providing the first and last miles to homes and businesses, our world relies on well-maintained roads and bridges. But we don't often stop to think about what it takes behind the scenes to maintain the elaborate system of local, state and federal highway infrastructure.

Unlike any other state in the country, Wisconsin county highway departments also maintain the state and federal systems, which are larger and more costly to keep in good condition. Our counties are doing everything they can to secure enough funding for all three systems.

Over the past few biennial state budgets, local governments have secured ongoing funding increases for important programs, including General Transportation Aids, the Local Roads Improvement Program, the Agricultural Roads Improvement Program, and the Local Small Structures Improvement Program. We also secured an increase in the most recent biennial budget for routine maintenance agreement funding for snow plowing, shoulder maintenance, mowing, crack sealing, and other maintenance needs of the state and federal systems.

Continued on page 8

Unlike any other state in the country,

Wisconsin county highway departments also maintain the state and federal systems, which are larger and more costly to keep in good condition. Our counties are doing everything they can to secure enough funding for all three systems.

Continued from page 7

But our entire system is only as successful as its weakest part. If county highways are well maintained but town roads are in rough condition, travelers think poorly of the entire system, since the average person likely doesn't differentiate who owns what. Likewise, if the city road is in great shape but the bridge on a county highway is out, the efficiency of moving people and goods from point A to point B suffers.

The only way to ensure we have a strong statewide transportation system is to view it as a whole. Recent funding increases have continued to move us in the right direction. But what happens if those funding increases run dry? While this may seem far-fetched given that transportation is one of the few priorities that straddles the political divide, it's not that far off if we don't shore up our state revenue streams.

The transportation programs mentioned previously are

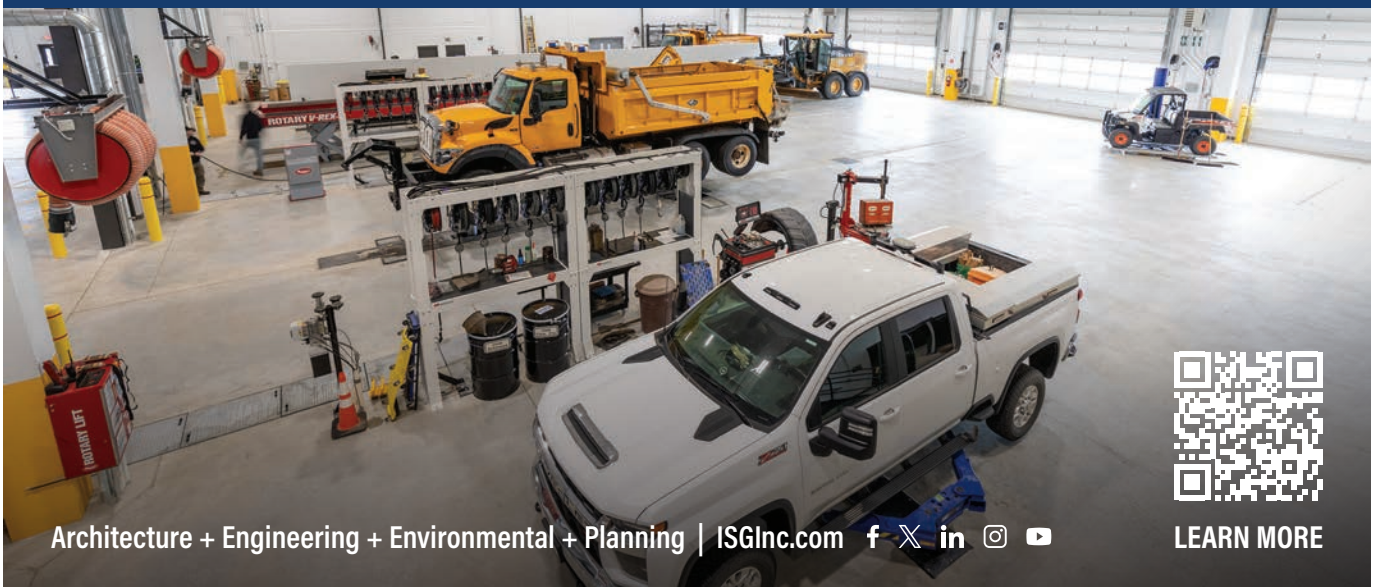
supported by the state Transportation Fund, which the state general fund has subsidized in recent years, primarily from income and sales taxes. This means our transportation-specific revenues are not bringing in enough dollars to cover the Transportation Fund expenditures. Without assurance that general-purpose revenue will be transferred in the future, there is no guarantee the state will continue funding these programs at the same levels or higher.

To address this situation, transportation stakeholders statewide are prioritizing the search for a long-term, sustainable revenue solution. We're asking lawmakers and the next governor to take this problem seriously and commit to finding a solution. Right now, we're not asking them to enact a specific proposal. Instead, we're keeping all options on the table, as there may not be a single silver bullet. ■

Collin Driscoll is a government affairs associate for the Wisconsin Counties Association. He focuses on transportation, public works, agriculture, environment, land use and taxes.

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A large industrial workshop with various vehicles and equipment. In the foreground, a white pickup truck is parked. Behind it, a yellow dump truck is visible. The workshop has high ceilings and large windows. Various tools and equipment are scattered throughout the space.

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Strengthening Wisconsin's Future Amid Political Change

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

Change is in the air in Wisconsin. A new chapter of state leadership is approaching, bringing fresh perspectives, new priorities and inevitable questions about what comes next. With next year's guaranteed turnover in gubernatorial and legislative leadership, the only certainty is uncertainty. Priorities will evolve, alliances will shift and economic pressures will challenge Wisconsin's ability to meet competing needs.

Change can be healthy. New leaders bring new thinking, fresh approaches and creative problem-solving. At the same time, political transition complicates long-range planning, particularly for transportation investments that must be delivered over many years — often decades — rather than within a single budget cycle.

These dynamics, combined with a looming transportation funding crisis, are exactly why the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Counties Association and other partners launched the Transportation Delivers effort last year. The campaign's straightforward goal is to educate policymakers and reinforce a simple truth that holds regardless of the



The Transportation Delivers campaign's straightforward goal is to educate policymakers and reinforce a simple truth that holds regardless of the political climate:

When Wisconsin invests in transportation, Wisconsin wins.

political climate: When Wisconsin invests in transportation, Wisconsin wins.

Local governments were the first to step forward, signaling that transportation

funding stability is not only a statewide concern but also a local imperative.

► **Local resolutions: A unified call for sustainable funding**

Momentum is building across Wisconsin for a sustainable transportation funding solution. Since early this year, more than 600 units of local government, including nearly 60 counties, have passed resolutions urging state leaders to

provide a funding framework that delivers reliable revenue growth, uses available funding tools responsibly, preserves the value of transportation user fees, and ensures Wisconsin can maintain and improve its transportation infrastructure.

The resolution campaign will continue through next year's state budget process,

aiming to secure more than 1,000 resolutions from local governments across Wisconsin to demonstrate broad support for long-term transportation investment.



Eau Claire County Executive Jon Johnson presents at the Eau Claire roundtable event.

Building on this strong foundation of local action, the campaign focused on creating opportunities for leaders and residents to come together and share firsthand experiences regarding transportation needs, challenges and opportunities.

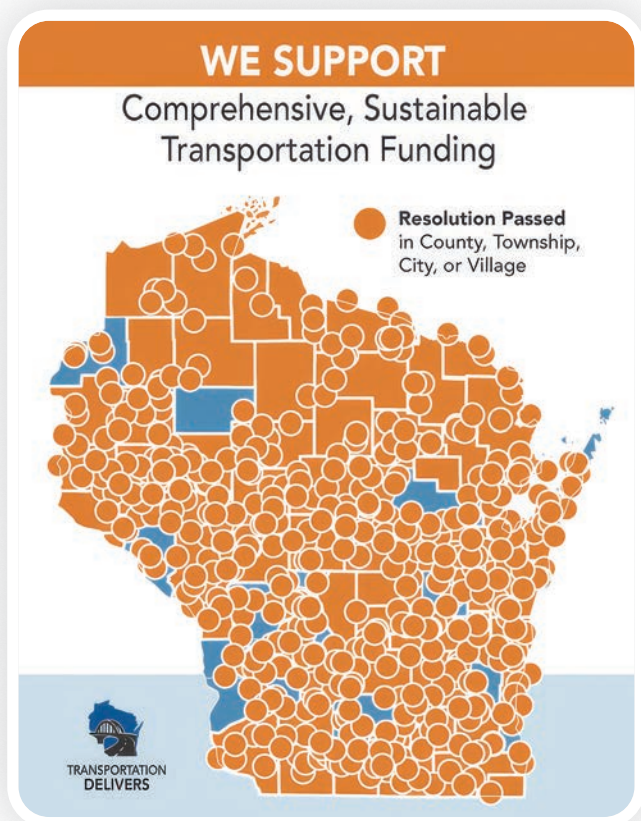
► **Roundtables: Bringing Wisconsin together and telling our stories**

In May, more than 600 Wisconsinites, including state legislators, candidates, local officials, community

leaders, and industry partners, gathered for six regional meetings statewide. Attendees examined the condition of Wisconsin's transportation infrastructure, explored emerging opportunities, and discussed real-world impacts on neighborhoods, businesses, and the state's economy.

Despite regional differences, the same themes emerged wherever we went. Local leaders are grateful for the

Continued on page 12



Resolutions passed as of August 2026

Transportation Delivers Roundtables **BY THE NUMBERS**

- 6 locations: Appleton, La Crosse, Eau Claire, Wausau, Oak Creek, and Janesville
- 600+ participants
- 75 legislators and candidates
- 50% of legislative leaders
(including officers and caucus chairs)
- 60% of Joint Finance Committee members



Waukesha County Public Works Director Allison Bussler speaks on the panel at the Oak Creek roundtable event.

Continued from page 11

additional transportation funding in recent state budgets and can point to projects and real improvements those investments made possible. There's a shared sense that Wisconsin has built meaningful momentum in recent years, with broad support for sustaining it.

At the same time, demand still outpaces available resources. Roads are aging, project costs are rising and inflation means each transportation dollar doesn't stretch as far as it used to. Counties and municipalities are doing everything they can to keep up, but the gap is becoming harder to close. Now is the time to build on our progress, not change course.

Participants also made clear that roadway safety, including bike and pedestrian safety, remains a top priority.

They underscored a fundamental truth that Wisconsin's transportation network is only as strong as its weakest link. Strengthening one part of the system at the expense of another merely shifts problems rather than solving them.

These roundtables reignited a statewide conversation about the need for adequate, sustainable funding, and the costs households and businesses will face if Wisconsin fails to act.

► **Doing nothing: The most expensive option**

Affordability is the buzzword in this election cycle, and the roundtable panelists emphasized that Wisconsin's infrastructure decisions have real consequences for residents and businesses. When a bridge is weight-limited and a logger must take a 12-mile detour with a fully loaded truck, the added time and fuel are costs. When a manufacturer builds extra

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These roundtables reignited a statewide conversation about the need for adequate, sustainable funding, and the costs households and businesses will face if Wisconsin fails to act.

time into delivery schedules because congestion or recurring crashes make travel unpredictable, the lost productivity is a cost. When families replace bent rims or repair suspensions because deteriorating roads damage their vehicles, the strain on household budgets is a cost.

These are not abstract inconveniences. They represent real financial pressure on households already stretched thin, small businesses striving to stay competitive and local governments managing limited resources. These costs are compounded when needed projects are postponed, leading to higher price tags when the work is eventually completed.

► The work ahead

Wisconsin cannot afford to wait. The choices we make today will determine whether projects move forward

on schedule and whether our transportation system strengthens our economy or holds it back. Doing nothing carries a price that rises each year, while investing now creates safer roads, stronger communities and a more competitive future for every Wisconsinite.

Thank you to the counties and county officials who participated in the resolution drive or attended a roundtable. Stay tuned for the next steps as we work to ensure Transportation Delivers for Wisconsin. ■

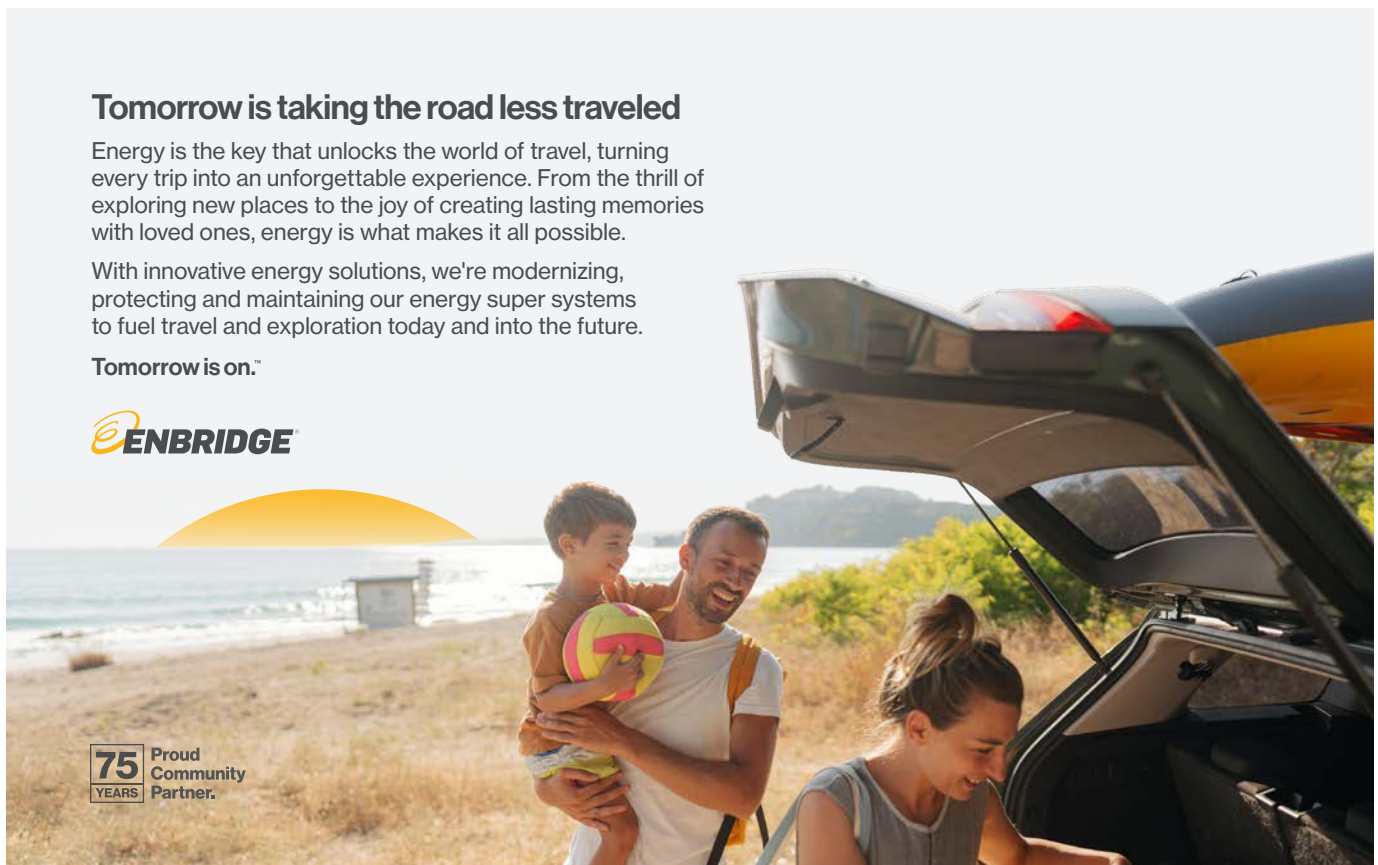
Debby Jackson has been the executive director of the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin since 2019. The TDA is a statewide alliance of 400-plus transportation stakeholders committed to a safe, modern, interconnected transportation network that supports a strong economy and enhances the quality of life for everyone in Wisconsin.

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The Price of the Road

More Than a Century of Wisconsin Transportation Funding

By Jacob Anderson, Research Analyst, Forward Analytics

Wisconsin has spent more than a century developing and adjusting how it pays for roads, highways and bridges. Among the longest-standing revenue sources are the motor vehicle registration fees and the fuel tax, both dating back to the early 1900s.

While they have changed over the years, the intent behind the taxes and fees remains largely the same — to balance rising transportation costs and changing vehicle use with the principle that users of the transportation system should bear much of the cost of maintaining it.

► Vehicle registration fees: First tax on motor vehicles

As Kenosha-built Ramblers and Racine-built Mitchell motor vehicles began appearing on city streets at the turn of the last century, the state recognized the need for official vehicle registration and a funding source for road improvements. In 1905, Wisconsin passed its first vehicle registration law with a fee of \$1 per vehicle. By year's end, the state had registered 1,492 vehicles. Within six years, the registration fee rose to \$5 and became required annually.

As the number and variety of vehicles on Wisconsin's roads grew, so did the complexity of the registration system.

In 1917, the state began separating registrations by vehicle type — \$4 for motorcycles, \$10 for passenger vehicles, and \$15–\$25 for trucks, depending on carrying capacity.

Only a few years later, the state recognized the impact of larger and heavier vehicles on our roads. By 1923, the state licensed all vehicles by weight. The fees for passenger vehicles ranged from \$10 to \$26, with a 25% reduction for vehicles more than five years old. The state also began to

RECENT VEHICLE REGISTRATION FEES

Year of change	Old fee	New fee	Percent change
AUTOMOBILE			
1981	\$18.00	\$25.00	39%
1991	\$25.00	\$40.00	60%
1997	\$40.00	\$45.00	13%
2003	\$45.00	\$55.00	22%
2008	\$55.00	\$75.00	36%
2019	\$75.00	\$85.00	13%
80,000 lb. TRUCK			
1982	\$1,620.00	\$1,700.00	5%
1992	\$1,700.00	\$1,850.00	9%
1997	\$1,850.00	\$1,987.50	7%
2008	\$1,987.50	\$2,578.00	30%

differentiate among trailers, semitrailers, buses, tractors, and municipally owned vehicles for registration purposes. Their fees ranged from \$10 to \$45, with an additional \$5 for each quarter ton above five tons.

In 1927, Wisconsin began levying a special tax on trucks based on ton-miles traveled, in addition to regular registration fees. In 1931, the state published a new registration fee schedule that required higher-weight vehicles to pay higher rates.

By 1947, the state sought to simplify the administration of registrations and established a flat \$16 fee for all passenger vehicles. Around the same time, Wisconsin was also the first state to stagger registration renewals, easing the annual rush to renew registrations.

Over the ensuing decades, the state has continued to modify the level and structure of vehicle registration fees to reflect changes in vehicles and how they are used.

More recently, the state implemented an additional \$100 registration fee for electric vehicles in 2017. It has since modified the additional fee to \$175 for fully electric vehicles and \$75 for hybrid vehicles.

► Fuel taxes: Paying at the pump since 1925

As more motor vehicles appeared in the early 1900s and expectations for paved roads and way-finding signage grew, registration fees alone were insufficient to fund the necessary improvements. So, in keeping with the principle that its users should pay for road improvements, Wisconsin began taxing fuel at 2 cents per gallon in 1925.

The funds were initially deposited into the state's general fund, with the understanding that they would be appropriated for specific transportation spending. To help ensure that transportation revenues would be used for transportation costs, the state created the first segregated state highway fund in 1945.

Over the next six decades, fuel tax increases were

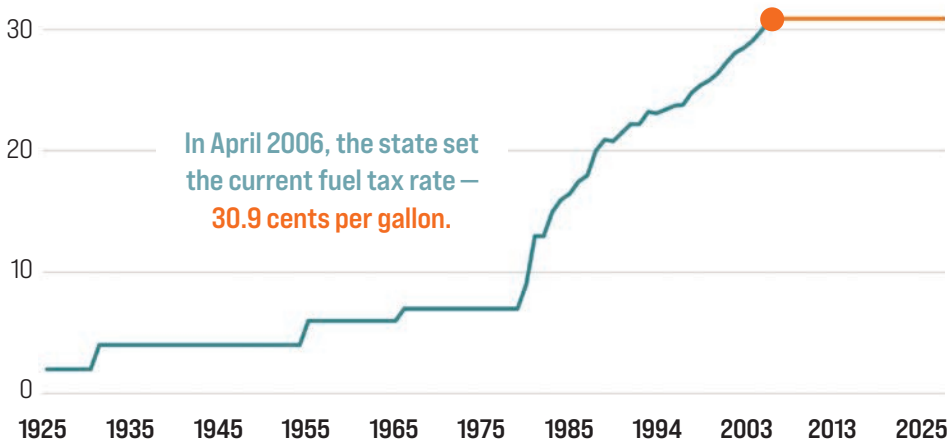


infrequent because the law had to be amended specifically to change the rate. Then came a period of significant inflation and declining fuel consumption. So, in 1983, state lawmakers created an automatic indexing formula based on inflation and fuel consumption to keep pace with changes in highway program costs.

In 1997, however, they removed the fuel-consumption component of the indexing formula, leaving fuel tax rate increases tied solely to inflation.

That system remained until April 2006, when the state repealed the index formula altogether and set the fuel tax rate at 30.9 cents per gallon — the rate that is still in place.

GAS TAX RATE PER GALLON, 1925-2025



► Planning for the road ahead

Today, passenger and commercial vehicles are becoming more efficient and electric vehicles are becoming more common. As a result, fuel tax revenue continues to decline in inflation-adjusted dollars, and the reliance on vehicle registration revenue grows.

As in the past, the state has responded to the need for more dedicated revenue by adjusting registration fees and fuel taxes — most recently with additional registration charges for electric vehicles. However, the state's ability to fully fund transportation costs with segregated revenue remains in question. The road ahead may require another answer. ■

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



Small Structures, **Big Impact**

CREATING A LASTING SOLUTION FOR LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE

By Joe Ruth, Government Affairs Director and Legal Counsel, Wisconsin Towns Association

Thousands of culverts and small bridges quietly support Wisconsin's local road system. They connect residents to jobs and schools, enable emergency services to reach communities, and help move agricultural products and other goods throughout the state. Yet until recently, Wisconsin lacked a comprehensive statewide inventory of the locations and conditions of these structures that indicates which need the most urgent attention.

The new Local Small Structure Improvement Program is beginning to change that. While the program's \$30 million investment will help communities replace some of Wisconsin's most deteriorated structures, an equally important accomplishment occurred before the first grant application was submitted. Wisconsin undertook a first-

of-its-kind statewide effort to inventory and assess small structures owned by counties, towns and municipalities.

Together, these efforts have given local governments and state policymakers a clearer picture of the state's small-structure network and the information needed to begin addressing its most pressing needs. They have also laid the groundwork for future transportation investment and long-term infrastructure planning.

► **Starting with an inventory**

For years, transportation funding and attention focused primarily on larger bridges. Increased federal investment, combined with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's commitment to local bridge needs, helped communities address many of their most pressing

structural challenges. As progress on these larger structures advanced, local governments could turn their attention to the thousands of culverts and small bridges that form the backbone of Wisconsin's transportation system.

Local officials recognized the challenges posed by aging culverts and small bridges, but many communities lacked the resources to identify each structure, assess its condition or proactively plan for replacement. As structures aged, weight restrictions often became the most practical way to protect public safety and extend their useful life. While necessary, weight restrictions create challenges for farmers, businesses, emergency services and others who depend on reliable local roads. Too often, local governments are forced to defer repairs and replacements, leading to higher costs and fewer opportunities to plan cost-effective improvements.

Recognizing this gap, local officials and transportation stakeholders, including the Wisconsin Counties Association and the Wisconsin Towns Association, advocated for a statewide inventory and condition assessment of small, local structures. That effort secured \$12.5 million in the 2023-25 state budget to identify, inventory and inspect locally owned bridges and culverts between 6 and 20 feet long.

That work required far more than reviewing maps and existing records. Local officials, county highway departments and contracted inspectors collaborated to identify structures, document their characteristics and assess their condition. The result was Wisconsin's first comprehensive statewide inventory and condition assessment of locally owned small structures.

Inspectors ultimately identified more than 17,000 structures, including about 1,600 in poor or severe

condition. For the first time, local officials, WisDOT and state policymakers had consistent, statewide information documenting the system's size and the extent of its needs.

For local governments, that information's value extends well beyond state funding programs.

Knowing where structures are located and understanding their condition enables local officials to incorporate replacement and maintenance needs into capital improvement plans, road maintenance schedules and long-term transportation planning. It also creates opportunities to coordinate

structure replacements with planned road projects, helping communities avoid duplicative work, reduce costs, and minimize

disruption to businesses and residents. Just as importantly, it allows communities to anticipate major replacement costs before deteriorating structures become emergencies.

► Turning information into action

Identifying and assessing these structures was an important accomplishment, but the information itself was not the end goal. That information provided the foundation for lawmakers to create the Local Small Structure Improvement Program in the 2025-27 state budget. The program, funded through a \$30 million set-aside within the state's \$150 million Agricultural Roads Improvement Program, provides a 90% state cost share to help local governments replace critically deteriorated culverts and small bridges identified in the statewide assessment.

The Local Small Structure Improvement Program was designed as an initial step to address Wisconsin's most urgent small-structure needs. Eligibility was limited to structures identified in the inventory and rated as being in poor or severe condition, focusing available funding on



A statewide inventory and condition assessment secured \$12.5 million in the 2023-25 state budget to identify, inventory and inspect locally owned bridges and culverts between 6 and 20 feet long. Inspectors ultimately identified more than 17,000 structures, including about 1,600 in poor or severe condition.

Continued on page 18



The first round of Local Small Structure Improvement Program awards will address some of Wisconsin's most urgent needs, but the demand for assistance shows that those needs extend well beyond a single funding cycle.

Continued from page 17

those presenting the greatest concerns.

Even with that targeted approach, demand for the program was substantial, as communities submitted 430 applications seeking approximately \$134 million in funding. With only \$30 million available, the program awarded funding to 101 projects. While these awards will help address some of Wisconsin's most urgent infrastructure needs, the overwhelming demand confirms that Wisconsin's small-structure needs extend well beyond a single funding cycle.

► Building on a strong foundation

Progress over the past several years has been significant, but the work is far from complete. Infrastructure management is an ongoing responsibility. Structures continue to age, conditions change and replacement needs evolve. The

statewide inventory created an invaluable baseline, but maintaining that information through ongoing inspections and updates will be essential. The same is true of funding. The first round of Local Small Structure Improvement Program awards will address some of Wisconsin's most urgent needs, but the demand for assistance shows that those needs extend well beyond a single funding cycle.

Now is the opportunity to build on the foundation Wisconsin has laid. Future efforts should combine inspection and inventory updates with long-term, sustainable funding assistance, enabling local governments to shift from reacting to failures to proactively managing critical infrastructure before safety concerns, weight restrictions, or emergency replacements become necessary. ■

Joe Ruth is the government affairs director and legal counsel for the Wisconsin Towns Association, a statewide, voluntary, nonprofit and nonpartisan association of member town and village governments.

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Counties at Work

Delivering Value Through Routine Maintenance Agreements

By Patrick B. Vander Sanden, Executive Director, Wisconsin County Highway Association

Wisconsin county public works and transportation staff take pride in maintaining and operating the state highway system, which includes interstates and the federal and state-numbered highways. The unique collaboration between counties and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation — the only one of its kind in the United States — has existed for more than a century, dating back to the creation of the Wisconsin State Trunk Highway System. It continues to serve the state, its communities and the traveling public exceptionally well.

At the center of the partnership with WisDOT is the framework for routine maintenance agreements (RMAs), which allow counties to provide essential maintenance services on the state's behalf. For the 2026 calendar year, counties will collectively receive \$164.2 million under the RMAs.

Simple in concept, RMAs are more complex in execution. Through 72 individual agreements, one with each county highway department, WisDOT sets maintenance expectations and service levels while counties provide the workforce, equipment, materials and local expertise needed to keep the state highway system safe and operational. In return, counties

are reimbursed for the costs of performing that work.

Maintaining a highway system requires far more than filling potholes and plowing snow. Counties must provide skilled labor, maintain specialized equipment, purchase materials such as road salt and asphalt, and respond to changing roadway and weather conditions year-round. Determining how counties are reimbursed for these costs is a critical component of the RMAs.

The Wisconsin County Highway Association and its members serving Wisconsin county highway departments play a significant role in that process. Two standing WCHA committees help ensure that reimbursement calculations reflect operational realities. The Machinery Management Committee, composed of county highway commissioners, finance professionals, and WisDOT representatives, continually evaluates and sets equipment reimbursement rates. Because counties use county-owned equipment to maintain the state system, reimbursement rates must accurately reflect the true cost of ownership and operation.

The Level of Service Committee sets standards for maintenance work. From winter operations to routine right-of-way maintenance, the committee helps establish

expectations that promote consistency and accountability across the state highway system. The committee also works closely with WisDOT personnel. Together, the efforts of these two committees form the foundation of the model that determines the structure of RMAs.

While RMAs remain a successful example of state and local government partnership, funding has become an increasingly pressing concern.

The RMA program's intent is straightforward: Counties perform work on behalf of the state and are reimbursed for the costs of that work. However, funding allocations to counties have not kept pace with actual costs for many years. As labor, equipment, fuel, materials and operational expenses have risen, RMA funding has not fully reflected those increases.

The result is a widening funding gap between needs and available resources. Counties prepare for the necessary state work using the model set by the Level of Service Committee, but available funding doesn't cover those plans. Instead, adjustments to annual work plans require deferring routine maintenance, delaying projects and postponing preventive maintenance to prioritize essential services such as winter maintenance and emergency response. Recent analyses of RMA funding indicate that, in some cases, this gap has fallen well below 60% of the budgeted costs counties planned to keep up their end of the deal.

Internal analysis and WisDOT's own reviews of deferred maintenance needs have reinforced these findings. The message is clear: While the county-state partnership remains highly effective, the funding model requires ongoing attention to ensure its sustainability. Adequate resources remain a constant priority.

Wisconsin's 2025-27 state budget included a significant step toward addressing the challenge by allocating an additional \$30 million to the RMA program.

The impact was immediate. Counties with the largest funding gaps — the difference between allocated funding and the budget needed to fully meet established service levels — saw meaningful improvements. The budget increase provided every county with additional support. Before the increase, one county's allocation covered only about 39% of its identified needs. After the increase, no county remained below a 64% funding ratio, and most counties for calendar year 2026 ranged from 64% to 78%. This additional investment marks

important progress, but it does not eliminate the underlying gap between actual costs and planned maintenance needs.

The WCHA continues to work closely with WisDOT to emphasize the importance of maintaining and improving RMA funding. The account supporting RMA must manage fluctuations across the entire state system, and factors such as severe winters, rising fuel costs, and volatile material prices can significantly affect program funding needs. A review of material costs over the past decade shows how dramatically those expenses can change.

Despite these challenges, the principle remains unchanged. By leveraging county expertise, local equipment fleets, and an experienced workforce, WisDOT avoids duplicating resources that would otherwise be needed to manage maintenance operations independently in all 72 counties. The result is a collaborative approach that delivers value to taxpayers while maintaining one of the nation's most extensive transportation systems. ■

Patrick B. Vander Sanden is the executive director of the Wisconsin County Highway Association, which represents Wisconsin's 72 county highway and public works departments.

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Tolling and the Future of Road Funding

LESSONS FROM ACROSS AMERICA

By Zachary M. Radford, Vice President of Policy and Government Affairs, International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association

Seventy years ago, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which launched the modern Interstate Highway System.

That investment connected communities, created economic opportunities, and transformed how people and goods move across the country.

The nation also made a long-term commitment to fund the system by creating the Highway Trust Fund and dedicating federal fuel and other highway-user taxes to road investment. Today, that model is struggling to keep pace as aging roads and bridges require repair or replacement. The

American Society of Civil Engineers' 2025 Infrastructure Report Card gave the nation's roads a D+ and its bridges a C, estimating a \$684 billion funding gap over the next decade.

The Highway Trust Fund, the primary source of federal highway and transit funding, spends more than it collects. Since 2008, Congress has transferred more than \$275 billion to keep it solvent. Even

with those transfers, the Congressional Budget Office projects that its balances will be exhausted in 2028.

The federal gas tax has not increased since 1993, even as construction costs have risen. More fuel-efficient vehicles generate less fuel-tax revenue, and electric and alternative-





Wisconsin's path will be its own. Experience elsewhere shows the value of providing the state with a broad funding toolbox.

fuel vehicles contribute little or nothing in fuel taxes. The result is less certainty for states and local governments responsible for delivering projects.

► What this means for Wisconsin

Wisconsin's highway network developed differently from those in states with longstanding turnpike systems that collect tolls. Because no turnpike existed when the interstate system was created, Wisconsin's interstates were built largely as toll-free, federal-aid facilities. State law does not currently authorize interstate tolling.

As Wisconsin considers long-term transportation investment, lessons from other states can inform the discussion. Tolling is one of several user-based approaches worth examining, including its benefits, appropriate uses, and implementation challenges.

The stakes extend beyond the state highway system. Of Wisconsin's approximately 116,000 miles of public roads, nearly 90% are maintained by cities, towns, villages and counties. These governments rely on local revenue, state transportation aid and federal programs. Funding shortfalls lead to higher costs, delayed projects and difficult choices among maintenance, safety and economic development.

► Tolling is already delivering

According to IBTTA's tolling data visualization tool, there are 359 toll roads, bridges and tunnels operating nationwide, processing 10 billion transactions and generating \$25 billion annually to support infrastructure operations, maintenance and modernization.

Tolling takes several forms. Traditional turnpikes, bridges and tunnels charge drivers to use the facility, with revenue generally dedicated to it. Express toll lanes operate alongside toll-free lanes, offering a faster or more reliable trip. As a type of managed lane, they use pricing, access or vehicle-eligibility rules to maintain traffic flow. Some allow buses and qualifying carpools to travel toll-free, helping move more people through congested corridors.

Predictable toll revenue can support bonds and public-private partnerships, enabling projects to move forward sooner. Electronic tolling, license-plate imaging and digital payments also enable collection without requiring drivers to stop.

The benefits are wide-ranging. Georgia's Northwest Corridor Express Lanes provide congestion relief, with peak-period trips up to 27% faster than in adjacent lanes. In northern California, surplus Golden Gate Bridge tolls provide nearly half the funding for Golden Gate bus and ferry operations.

Benefits can extend beyond transportation. In western Pennsylvania, development around the Southern Beltway has created more than 3,000 jobs and an estimated \$11.5 million in annual real estate tax revenue for Allegheny County,

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Findlay Township and local schools. Florida's turnpike generated approximately \$1.3 billion in fiscal year 2025 to operate, maintain and expand infrastructure.

Together, these examples show that tolling can improve reliability, support transit, stimulate economic development and provide dependable infrastructure funding.

► From tolling to a broader funding toolbox

The principle behind tolling — linking transportation use to investment — can extend beyond a single facility. Governments are exploring approaches that price travel in congested areas or charge motorists based on miles driven.

New York's Congestion Relief Zone exemplifies the first approach. In its first year, traffic entering the zone fell by 11%, and the program supported \$15 billion in planned transit investment. Although not suitable for every community, area-based pricing can manage demand while generating dedicated funding.

Road usage charging offers another option: paying based on miles traveled rather than on fuel purchased. Hawaii introduced a statewide charge for electric vehicles in 2025. Drivers can choose between a per-mile charge and a flat annual fee, with the per-mile approach scheduled to become mandatory for electric vehicles in 2028.

Whether states can use these tools will depend partly on decisions before Congress.

► The federal policy opportunity

Congress periodically renews the law that sets federal transportation funding and programs and determines how states may use federal resources. The next surface transportation reauthorization will help shape which options states can pursue and how effectively they can move projects from the pilot stage to implementation.

Proposals advanced during the process, such as the recent bipartisan BUILD America 250 Act approved by a U.S. House committee in May, have called for fees on electric and plug-in hybrid vehicles and for progress toward a national mileage-based user-fee pilot.

Federal policy should also support communities exploring tolling and road pricing and give states greater flexibility to consider tolling when modernizing aging interstate facilities. It need not prescribe a single model. States and local leaders should have the flexibility, resources and data to evaluate the tools that best fit their needs.

Wisconsin's path will be its own. Experience elsewhere shows the value of providing the state with a broad funding toolbox. Seventy years after the Interstate Highway System was launched, tolling and other user-based approaches remain proven, scalable and increasingly sophisticated parts of the solution. ■

Zachary M. Radford is vice president of policy and government affairs at IBTTA. He brings more than 20 years of experience shaping federal and state transportation policy, with a record of advancing major infrastructure projects, innovative technology and safety priorities across highways, trucking, transit and rail.

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Working Together, We Fixed the Darn Roads

By Gov. Tony Evers

When I first ran for governor, I promised to fix the darn roads, and my administration has worked hard to do exactly that for the past seven-plus years. Since 2019, we've improved more than 2,400 bridges and more than 9,600 miles of roads across the state — enough to drive from Wausau to Disney World in Orlando, Florida, and back THREE times — with miles to spare!

Fixing the darn roads isn't just essential to the safety and well-being of our communities; it's critical to building the 21st-century infrastructure that supports a 21st-century economy. Earlier this year, I completed my final, annual statewide Pothole Patrol tour. Every time I met with folks in the community and our state's dedicated public works staff, it was clear that every pothole filled, street resurfaced and bridge reconstructed makes everyday life a little easier, much smoother and a whole lot safer. That's why I'm proud of the investments we've made as an administration to keep

our roads in good repair. Seven years later, it's clear our hard work is paying off.

After years of neglect under the last administration, our transportation infrastructure had fallen into disrepair. As governor, I've been proud to secure the investments needed to get our roads back on track — so to speak. During my time in office, we've secured some of the largest investments our state's transportation budget has seen in years. Thanks to these efforts, we've been hard at work building the 21st-century infrastructure folks need to get from point A to point B safely and efficiently.

Last year, I signed the bipartisan 2025-27 state budget, which allocated \$1.1 billion in new funding for key transportation investments to ensure our roads are safe and efficient for residents and visitors. I am also proud to have secured the highest level of funding in state history for our General Transportation Aids program, which helps



Gov. Tony Evers helps local public works staff on his statewide Pothole Patrol tour.

Since 2019, we've improved more than 2,400 bridges and more than 9,600 miles of roads across the state...



local communities repair, maintain, and improve local roads and the connecting highways critical to our state's infrastructure.

Our roads not only connect us to the places we need to go but also provide pathways for visitors to explore our great state. High-quality transportation infrastructure is essential so that folks arriving in our state from near and far can safely travel to any of our state's iconic tourist destinations — from the Wisconsin State Fair in West Allis and the Door County peninsula to the Apostle Islands in Bayfield and points in between.

Safe, reliable roads are essential to ensure our farmers and producers can transport millions of tons of product each year throughout the state and across the country, maintaining our status as America's Dairyland and one of the nation's top agricultural producers. Agriculture is the cornerstone of our economy and a core part of our culture and heritage. In 2023, through bipartisan legislation, we created the Agricultural Roads Improvement Program to improve rural roads and culverts. Since its creation, the program has allocated \$300 million across the last two state budgets to fund 120 projects in 56 of Wisconsin's 72 counties. We will continue to deliver this critical funding to ensure we can move agricultural and forestry products efficiently and effectively across the state.

I also believe the state should do its part to support our local partners and ensure our communities have the resources they need to meet both basic and unique needs, including fixing local roads and investing in local infrastructure. After years of our communities being expected to do more with less, in 2013, I was proud to announce a historic increase in shared revenue for local communities, including a 20% increase for most municipalities statewide. Building on this work, we were also proud to secure \$100 million in funding in the most recent state budget to support the successful Local Roads Improvement Program, which helps local governments improve seriously deteriorating county highways,



municipal streets in cities and villages, and town roads.

While I'm proud of our work to fix the darn roads, we know that building the 21st-century infrastructure needed for a 21st-century economy goes well beyond our roads; it also includes creating a robust multimodal transportation system. Thanks to my administration's efforts, earlier this year, I announced 10 new maritime projects. With additional funding we secured in the most recent budget, these projects will help local communities maintain and operate eligible lift bridges to support Wisconsin's maritime industry. We also secured \$50 million for the Harbor Assistance Program in the most recent

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budget to strengthen supply chain reliability, support waterborne freight and assist with economic development in Wisconsin's coastal communities.

In June, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, in partnership with Amtrak, submitted a grant application to the U.S. Department of Transportation, reviving a long-thwarted effort to expand passenger rail in Wisconsin. Our application proposes expanding the Amtrak Hiawatha service into Dane, Jefferson and Waukesha counties by building on existing railroad infrastructure to extend two daily Hiawatha Chicago-to-Milwaukee trains to Madison, Watertown and Pewaukee. We hope to gain momentum on this opportunity in the months ahead.

While it's been a long road to get our transportation infrastructure back on track after years of disinvestment leading up to my tenure as governor, I've been proud over my two terms as governor to secure the investments

Wisconsin's roads desperately needed. There is, as always, more work to be done. No matter who takes office in January, investing in our roads and transportation infrastructure will remain critically important to ensuring our industries, families, local communities and economies continue to thrive.

Since day one, my administration and I have been laying the groundwork for the future we want for our state — one that is safer and more efficient for everyone who uses our roads, rails or waterways to get where they need to go. I remain hopeful that, thanks to our work over the past nearly eight years, Wisconsin is well positioned to meet the evolving transportation needs of future generations. ■

Tony Evers is the 46th governor of Wisconsin. He took office in January 2019 after a long career as a public school science teacher, principal and the state's Superintendent of Public Instruction.

During Evers' first term in office as governor, he joined state and local officials in the ribbon-cutting for the reconstructed State Hwy 23 in Fond du Lac and Sheboygan counties.



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• D E C I S I O N 2 0 2 6 •

Wisconsin Gubernatorial Race

A Q&A with U.S. Rep. Tom Tiffany and Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley

► **Why are you seeking to serve as Wisconsin's next governor, and what is your vision for the state's future?**

• **TOM TIFFANY:** I'm a lifelong Wisconsinite who wants the very best for our state because this is where my roots are, where I raised my family, and where I want future generations to build their lives. I grew up on a dairy farm in western Wisconsin, worked my way through UW-River Falls, and built a small business in the Northwoods with my wife, Chris, while raising our three daughters. Those experiences taught me the value of hard work, personal responsibility, and making every dollar count.

Today, too many Wisconsin families are feeling squeezed by rising costs. Property taxes have increased at some of the fastest rates in decades, utility rates have increased over \$2 billion under Gov. Evers, and it is becoming harder to afford a home, raise a family, or start a business.

As governor, my priority will be making Wisconsin more affordable. I will end the 400-year property tax hike, hold

the Public Service Commission accountable for rising utility rates, protect our farmland from industrial-scale wind, solar, and data centers, increase healthcare price transparency, cut red tape that drives up housing and transportation costs, and root out waste, fraud, and abuse in state government. I believe Wisconsin's best days are still ahead, but we need leadership to unlock our state's potential.

• **DAVID CROWLEY:** I'm running for governor because now more than ever, Wisconsin needs steady, experienced executive leadership. I'm ready to stand up to MAGA extremists like Congressman Tom Tiffany and deliver results for people across our state.

I spent seven years in the State Capitol, so I understand how Madison works and, more importantly, how to bring people together to get things done. For the last five years, I've led Wisconsin's largest county through some of our greatest challenges, tackling public safety, public health, and fiscal recovery.

We've invested in small businesses, built affordable housing, made government more accessible, cut greenhouse gas emissions nearly in half, and delivered the largest property tax cut in Milwaukee County history. That record reflects what



David Crowley

I believe executive leadership should be: identifying challenges, bringing people together, and delivering results.

I am the only candidate in this race with both executive and legislative experience. I know how to lead, I know how to work with leaders in Madison, and I'm ready to hit the ground running on day one. The stakes are too high, and Wisconsin has no time to waste.

► **Counties are responsible for delivering many of the essential services Wisconsinites rely on — from public safety and roads to human services, public health and elections. What do you see as the greatest challenges facing Wisconsin counties over the next four years, and how would your administration work with counties to address them?**

• **TIFFANY:** Counties provide essential services that Wisconsinites depend on every day, and one of the biggest challenges they face is delivering those services while costs continue to rise. The latest state budget increased spending by roughly 15% and pushed Wisconsin's two-year budget above \$100 billion for the first time in state history. We need to make sure taxpayers are getting results for that money and that our counties have the resources and flexibility they need to meet their responsibilities.

As governor, I will work directly with county leaders to prioritize the basics: safe roads and bridges, strong law enforcement and public safety, reliable services, and responsible management of taxpayer dollars. I also want to get Madison out of the way where it makes sense. Local officials understand their communities better than bureaucrats in Madison. During my time in the state Legislature, I built a strong working relationship with the Wisconsin Counties Association. My administration will work to reduce unnecessary mandates and red tape, give counties greater flexibility, and make sure state government is a partner rather than an obstacle.



Tom Tiffany

• **CROWLEY:** Counties are on the front lines of government. They deliver critical services every day, but too often they are being asked to do more with fewer resources. Across Wisconsin, counties are facing rising costs, workforce shortages, growing

demand for mental health and substance use services, and increasing pressure to maintain infrastructure while keeping property taxes and other costs as low as possible for residents.

As governor, I would make the state a true partner with Wisconsin's counties. That starts with listening to county leaders and understanding the challenges communities are experiencing on the ground. We need to work together on sustainable funding solutions, strengthen the public-sector workforce, expand access to behavioral health and other essential services, and make strategic investments in infrastructure and economic development.

We should also look for opportunities to reduce duplication and give counties greater flexibility to innovate. Milwaukee County has shown that when government partners across jurisdictions and invests in prevention, data, and coordinated services, we can improve outcomes while using taxpayer dollars more effectively.

Wisconsin's counties are not simply another level of government. They are essential partners in delivering the services residents rely on every day. My administration would give county leaders a seat at the table, maintain clear communication, and work collaboratively on solutions that strengthen communities in every corner of Wisconsin.

► **Counties have expressed concerns about the growing costs of implementing state and federal mandates, workforce shortages and long-term fiscal pressures. If elected, what funding and policy priorities would your administration pursue to strengthen the state-county partnership and help counties meet these challenges?**

• **TIFFANY:** I got my start in public service as a town official, so I understand what local governments deal with when Madison or Washington hands down another mandate or regulation and leaves local officials to figure

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out how to implement it and pay for it. That's why one of my priorities as governor will be a Red Tape Reset to reduce state regulations by 25%. We will review outdated and unnecessary regulations, streamline permitting, and look closely at state mandates that drive up costs for counties without improving the services people receive.

My administration will also prioritize the core responsibilities of government, including transportation and infrastructure, public safety, education, and healthcare. I've sat on the local government side of the table. I understand that Madison should be working with our counties. As governor, county and local officials will have a seat at the table as we cut red tape, address workforce challenges, and make government more efficient.

• **CROWLEY:** As Milwaukee County Executive, I have seen firsthand the pressures counties face when they are asked to deliver essential services without the resources needed to sustain them. That's why I brought together a bipartisan coalition to pass Wisconsin Act 12 and deliver funding for every community across the state. But we know growing state and federal mandates, workforce shortages, rising costs, and long-term fiscal pressures are straining county governments across Wisconsin.

If elected, my administration would build a stronger, more predictable state-county partnership around three priorities: sustainable funding, flexibility, and shared accountability.

First, counties need the resources to carry out the responsibilities the state assigns to them. That means

increasing and stabilizing shared revenue, reviewing mandates that have become unsustainable, and ensuring that when the state requires counties to provide a service, the funding reflects the true cost of delivering it. Counties should not have to choose between maintaining core services and balancing their budgets.

Second, we need to give counties greater flexibility to address local challenges. Wisconsin's counties are diverse, and a solution that works in Milwaukee County may look different in a rural county or a growing suburban community. The state should establish clear outcomes and accountability while giving county leaders the flexibility to determine how best to achieve them.

Finally, we need to invest in the people who make county government work. Workforce shortages affect behavioral health, human services, public safety, infrastructure, and more. The state can help counties recruit and retain workers through investments in training, workforce development, competitive compensation strategies, and partnerships with technical colleges and other educational institutions.

Most importantly, I would bring county leaders into the policymaking process from the beginning — not after decisions have already been made. My experience as county executive has taught me that state and local governments accomplish more when we work as partners.

As governor, I would make sure Wisconsin's counties have the funding, flexibility, and partnership they need to serve their residents and build stronger communities for the future. ■

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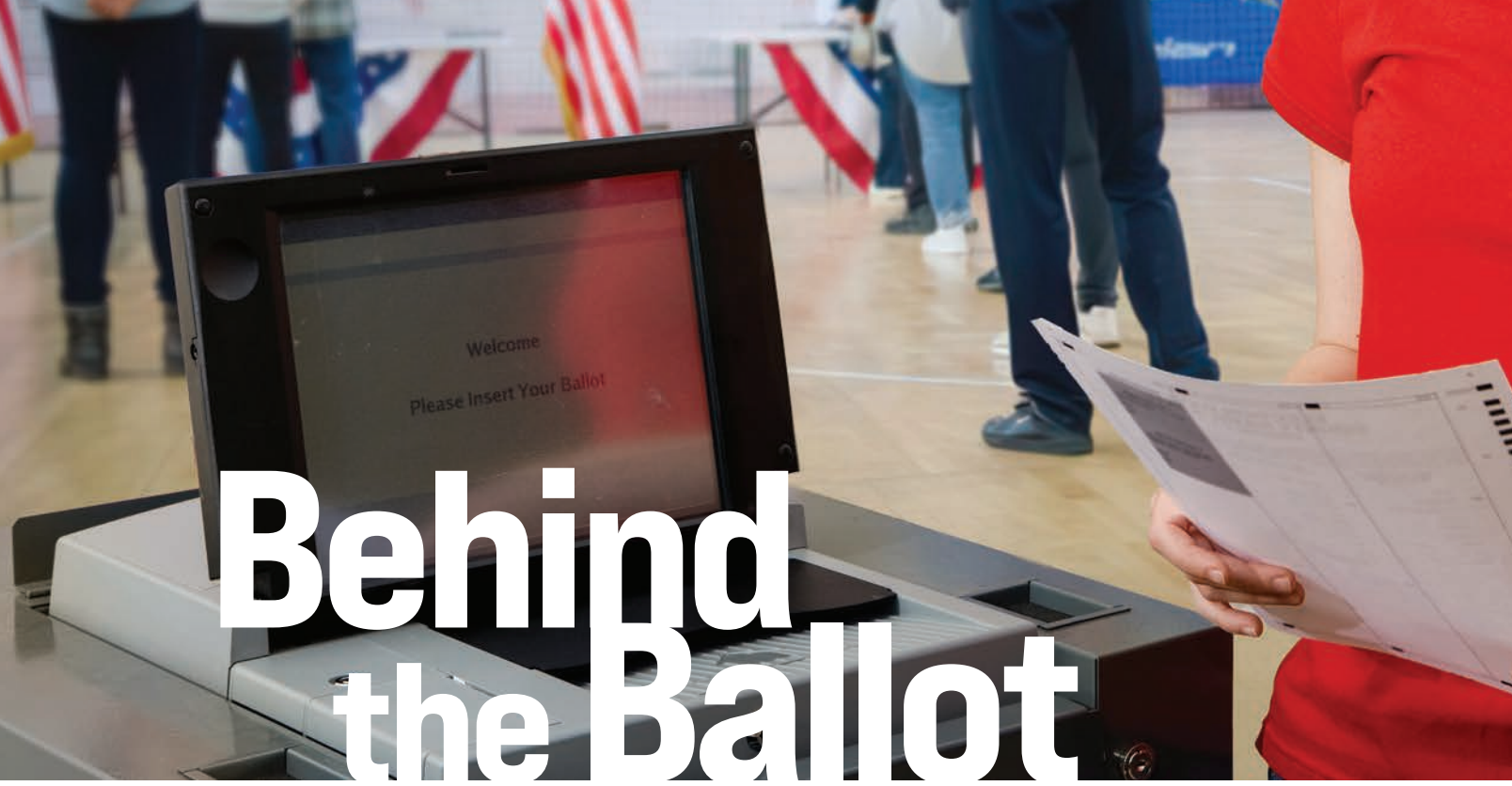
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Behind the Ballot

THE LAYERS OF ELECTION SECURITY

By Lisa Tollefson, County Clerk, Rock County

Many years ago, a Texas reporter called my office to ask about election security. The Wisconsin Elections Commission had referred him to me, thinking someone with a clerk's perspective might be able to explain what they could not.

The reporter and I talked for quite some time, and it finally dawned on me that he thought I had only one computer in my office for all my work. He thought I used the same computer to program our ballots as I did to answer emails. I clarified that I use one computer for all my daily work — emails, marriage licenses, minutes, etc. But I have an entirely separate system for running elections, consisting of multiple computers and servers, none of which are connected to the internet or to the computer I use for my daily work. Now he understood.

More recently, I gave an overview of election security at a town meeting. Afterward, one of my county board supervisors in attendance thanked me for the insight he gained from my presentation. He had heard theories that elections were hacked but didn't really understand how it all worked. Now he does.

So, let's help all of you understand how we secure elections in Wisconsin.

No internet connection. Since we have already discussed how the election computers in my office aren't connected to the internet, let's also note that the voting equipment at polling locations isn't connected to the internet. Think about how hard it is to fill a bucket with water from a hose if the hose isn't connected to the water spout. No connection — no water. It is hard to get into a system without a connection.

Then you might ask, "Well, what if they could connect?"

Encryption and passwords. There are additional layers in place to protect our systems. Our systems are heavily encrypted, and our passwords are long, strong and random and change with each election. The last time I checked the brute-force hacking charts, it would take millions of years to break my passwords. I also try to make them interesting. In the November 2020 election, all my passwords may have mentioned breweries and wineries in Rock County. (Apparently, I thought we all needed something refreshing after the craziness of that year.)

(L to R) Beloit City Clerk/Treasurer Rebecca Wallendal,
Rock County Clerk Lisa Tollefson and poll worker
Kathy Vogel at Beloit City Hall on Aug. 4.



Photo: Beloit Daily News

Now you may be thinking, “Well, how do you know the tabulators are accurate?”

Test and verify. Before any municipality can purchase voting equipment in Wisconsin, it must be certified at the state and federal levels to ensure accuracy. In Wisconsin, we require a paper-verifiable backup for every vote cast. We use that paper trail to test and audit our elections. Within 10 days of every election, municipal clerks across Wisconsin conduct a public test of the voting equipment used in that election. That test must be 100% accurate.

After every general election, officials conduct a mandatory audit of voting equipment. During the audit, teams hand-count ballots for several selected races and compare the results with the machine counts. After the November 2024 election, more than 327,000 ballots statewide were hand-counted, with the results confirming our equipment is accurate.

In 2018, Rock County began conducting audits after every election. All audits have shown that our machines are 100% accurate. Having participated in many audits and 11 recounts, I can tell you firsthand that our tabulators are extremely accurate.

Let’s add a few more layers ...

Physical security. This is another layer of protection for our elections. It includes restricted access to voting equipment and systems, fireproof safes and vaults, individually trackable seals, chain-of-custody forms, and other measures. But don’t forget the ...

Power of people. No one can underestimate the power of our people. Elections are not run by a single individual. In a general election, there are 72 county clerks, 1,851 municipal clerks, and between 30,000 and 40,000 poll workers who protect our elections. They work as a team and take their jobs very seriously. Their dedication is admirable. During a poll worker training on ballot security, one poll worker said their clerk would wrestle someone to the ground to protect our elections. (I love them so much!)



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Check out “How Wisconsin Delivers Secure Elections” at bit.ly/WI-secure-elections.

What else?

Lots. I have not covered all the security features we use to protect our elections. Partly because if I told them to you, I’d also be telling the bad guys,

and partly because they told me my article could not fill the entire magazine. Apparently, other things are going on in our counties. ■

Lisa Tollefson is the county clerk for Rock County and has been working in election administration since 2009.

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Strengthening the Future Workforce

Envision Greater Fond du Lac Launches Talent Attraction Initiative

By Alyssa Gruenwald, Director of Marketing and Communications, Envision Greater Fond du Lac

Every successful community eventually faces the same question: Who will live here, work here and keep our economy growing in the decades ahead?

For Fond du Lac County, that question is becoming increasingly important. Today, about one in five county residents is 65 or older. Over the next two decades, demographic projections indicate that without intentional action, Fond du Lac County could begin to experience population decline. That trend affects far more than population statistics; it impacts employers' ability to hire, school enrollment, housing demand, small businesses, healthcare systems, and the local tax base.

"Our businesses want to grow in Fond du Lac County," said Sadie Howell, president and CEO of Envision Greater Fond du Lac. "But growth requires people. If we want employers to continue investing here and creating jobs, we have to ensure our community has a strong, sustainable workforce for the future."

To help address that challenge, Envision Greater Fond du Lac is launching the Make My Move Talent Attraction Program, funded through a competitive grant from the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation.

The Wisconsin State Legislature established a \$5 million statewide Talent Recruitment Grant program to help communities recruit working-age households to Wisconsin.



Envision successfully secured a \$346,000 grant to partner with Make My Move, a national talent attraction platform, with the goal of attracting 32 out-of-state households over the next two years.

► A workforce strategy, not a giveaway program

The program is designed to attract professionals and families who will live, work and become part of the Fond du Lac County community. Applicants must meet specific eligibility requirements before receiving any incentives.

Participants must currently live outside the state of Wisconsin, relocate to Fond du Lac County, have at least one household member earning a minimum annual income of \$55,000, complete an application process, pass a criminal background check, and meet ongoing residency and employment verification requirements.

Only applicants who successfully complete these requirements are eligible to receive relocation incentives.

“This isn’t about giving money away,” Howell said. “It’s about making a strategic investment in the future workforce of Fond du Lac County. New households contribute to our local economy by purchasing homes, renting apartments, shopping at local businesses, paying property and sales taxes, enrolling children in schools, volunteering, and becoming part of the community.”

► One part of a larger workforce strategy

Envision Greater Fond du Lac was formed in 2017 through the unification of the former Fond du Lac Area Association of Commerce and the Fond du Lac County Economic Development Corporation. The strategic move created a single organization focused on advancing economic growth, supporting businesses and strengthening the community.

The unification has delivered measurable regional impact. Between 2017 and 2023, Envision generated millions of dollars in economic activity, supported thousands of jobs, and contributed to significant wage and benefit growth across Fond du Lac County. These results

reflect the power of alignment, partnership, and shared purpose — providing a strong foundation for Envision’s current and future work.

The Make My Move initiative is one component of Envision Greater Fond du Lac’s broader workforce strategy, which also includes employer support, career development, housing initiatives, young professional engagement, childcare advocacy, entrepreneurship, and efforts to retain local talent.

The program does not replace investments in current residents. It complements them.

“This program allows Wisconsin to compete while helping ensure Fond du Lac County remains a place where businesses can grow, families can thrive, and future generations have opportunities.”

— *Sadie Howell, Envision Greater Fond du Lac*



“As our employers compete nationally for talent, communities across the country are investing in workforce attraction,” Howell said. “Doing nothing is not a strategy. This program allows Wisconsin to compete while helping ensure Fond du Lac County remains a place where businesses can grow, families can thrive, and future generations have opportunities.”

Envision expects the program to generate lasting economic benefits through increased workforce participation, consumer spending, housing demand, and long-term community engagement.

“We’re focused on the next 20 years, not just the next two,” Howell said. “Our responsibility is to help ensure Fond du Lac County remains economically strong for our residents, our employers and the next generation.”

Envision Greater Fond du Lac’s 2025–2030 Strategic Plan focuses on three priorities that will shape the long-term strength of our economy: aligning community around a shared economic vision, empowering entrepreneurs and innovation, and building a future-ready workforce.

A strong local economy depends on attracting new investment and supporting the innovators already here. Initiatives like our talent attraction program, workforce partnerships with educators and employers, and youth engagement programs are helping connect people to careers and communities where they can thrive. ■

Alyssa Gruenwald is the director of marketing and communications for Envision Greater Fond du Lac, the unified organization of the former Fond du Lac Area Association of Commerce and former Fond du Lac County Economic Development Corporation organizations.



BROWN COUNTY

BROWN COUNTY'S HERITAGE TRAIL The Making of Titledown

Some call the Green Bay Packers

the greatest story in sports; a David vs. Goliath situation where the little guy wins. And wins big.

For generations, the Green Bay Packers have been part of the fabric of Brown County. Their history is found not only inside Lambeau Field, but in the neighborhoods, businesses, streets and gathering places that helped shape the team and the city it calls home.

That history is the focus of a season five episode of Uniquely Wisconsin, "The Making of Titledown: Brown County's Heritage Trail." The episode debuted in September on YouTube and across Discover Wisconsin streaming platforms, with additional social and digital stories bringing the history to a broader audience.

"The Green Bay Packers Heritage Trail offers visitors a different way to experience the Packers story," said Brown County Executive Troy Streckenbach. "Rather than focusing solely on the team's home field, the trail takes visitors into our community, connecting historic locations with the people and events that helped



By Michelle Gormican Thompson, WCA Communications

establish the Packers as a cornerstone of Green Bay, as well as the rest of our state."

That connection is what makes the Heritage Trail more than a collection of historic markers. Each location provides another piece of the story,

helping visitors understand how the Packers became intertwined with the community and how Green Bay became known as Titledown.

Across Wisconsin, counties play an important role in preserving historic places, supporting cultural attractions and promoting the stories that make their communities unique. Those efforts help strengthen a community's sense of place while also providing opportunities for tourism and economic development.

Brown County's Heritage Trail offers a particularly powerful example. The Packers' history may draw visitors to Green Bay, but the trail encourages them to explore the community beyond the football field and discover the people and places that helped build it. □

► **WATCH NOW:** discoverwisconsin.com/dw-uniquely-wisconsin



Follow Uniquely Wisconsin on Discover Wisconsin's Facebook, Instagram and YouTube channels

WALWORTH COUNTY

GAGE MARINE Lake Geneva's Legacy on the Water

For more than 150 years, Gage Marine's story has been intertwined with the city of Lake Geneva's history. What began in 1873 as the Lake Geneva Steamboat Line has evolved into one of the region's best-known, family-owned businesses, with three generations of the Gage family helping shape its future while preserving its connection to the lake and the community.

Today, third-generation owner Bill Gage Jr. carries forward a family legacy that began when his grandfather, Russell Gage, purchased the former Wisconsin Transportation Company in 1958. Bill Gage Sr. later joined the business and helped transform it as traditional lake transportation was declining and the community's relationship with Geneva Lake was changing.

Bill Gage Jr.'s story, and Walworth County, is featured in a Uniquely Wisconsin program, "Lake Geneva's Legacy on the Water: Gage Marine." Coverage of his story was released in September.

"Being a part of this community and making it a little better is very important to me. Those are the lessons I was taught by my father and grandfather, and they are universal everywhere," said Gage Jr.

"Owning and operating this business is one of the greatest privileges I've had, and I say 'we' because it's not just me. It takes a team of great people, and I feel that as a heavy obligation. I don't think of this as a business for my family; I think of it for all the people that live in our community."

"VISIT Lake Geneva is thrilled to have Gage Marine highlighted on Uniquely Wisconsin. It's our goal to attract visitors from around the world, and Gage Marine offers the quintessential Lake Geneva experience," said VISIT Lake Geneva President and Chief Executive Officer Stephanie Klett, "And what better way to showcase it than on Uniquely Wisconsin." □

► **WATCH NOW:** discoverwisconsin.com/dw-uniquely-wisconsin

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

To see season five stories or previous seasons, visit Discover Wisconsin's YouTube page at youtube.com/DiscoverWI and scroll down to the "Uniquely Wisconsin" section. Current counties sharing their Uniquely Wisconsin stories in Season Five, which will be released through December 2026, include Walworth, Brown, Sawyer, Grant and Washington. To learn more and join the Emmy Award-winning Uniquely Wisconsin brand, contact WCA President & CEO Mark O'Connell or WCA Communications Consultant Michelle Gormican Thompson at 866-404-2700.



- October 28
- November 18
- December 16

New Guide to Regulating Renewable Energy and Data Center Projects Focus of October “In the Board Room” Webinar

In September, the WCA released a “Guide to County Regulation of Renewable Energy and Data Center Projects.” It includes background information on the current legal landscape for regulating these projects and a county’s role in the process.

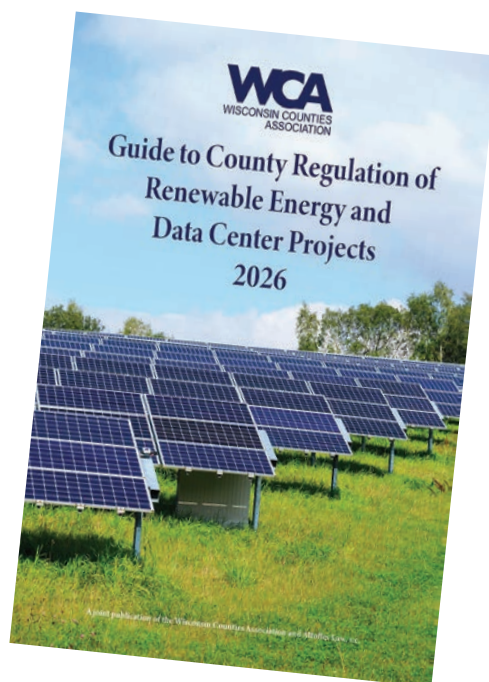
The guide features template ordinances for local operating agreements regarding solar developments; regulating utility-scale, standalone battery energy storage systems; requiring notice for large-scale data center developments; and zoning ordinances regulating data centers.

Learn more about the guide and how a county can best position itself to protect its interests by joining the Attolles Team at noon on Wednesday, Oct. 28 for the next “In the Board Room” webinar.

Members can download the guide on the WCA website at wicounties.org.

Visit bit.ly/InTheBoardRoom26 to register for the 2026 webinars.

There is no cost to register. Recordings of all webinars are available on the WCA website. ■



amazon business

Prime Exclusive Offer for WCA Members

The WCA has partnered with Amazon Business for a new, exclusive program. WCA member counties and their departments are now eligible to sign up for a free Amazon Business Prime membership that includes free and fast shipping, a pre-approved line of credit, and a 25% discount on select office, maintenance, repair, operational and IT products.

WCA members can also leverage a competitively awarded contract by OMNIA Partners to purchase on Amazon Business across all categories for additional savings.

Contact the WCA for more information.

Apply for 2026 Law Enforcement Grants by Oct. 30

To support its member law enforcement agencies' risk management efforts,

the Wisconsin County Mutual

Insurance Corporation and Community Insurance Corporation have established the 2026 ALERT Law Enforcement Grants program.

A total of \$30,000 in grant funds is available.

Grantees must hold an active County Mutual/CIC General Liability insurance policy at the time of entry; meet the definition of a "law enforcement agency" as outlined in Wis. Stat. Ch. 165; and submit the completed application by 4:30 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 30, 2026.

Law enforcement agencies are welcome to apply for grants to fund training; equipment, technology and personal protective equipment (NO firearms or non/less-lethal alternatives); community awareness campaigns; mental health and wellness; and other innovative ideas and programs.

Grant winners will be notified following the County Mutual and CIC's Loss Prevention/Workers' Compensation



Advisory Committee's November meeting.

Contact Josh Dirkse, senior vice president

of client services, at josh.dirkse@charlestaylor.com or 800-236-6885, with any questions.

Visit bit.ly/2026-law-enforcement-grants for more information and to apply. ■

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.

Join the WCA CAP Team to Make Your Voice Heard

State and federal lawmakers make decisions that directly affect county government. Your voice can help shape those decisions.

Since 2010, the Wisconsin Counties Association's County Ambassador Program (CAP) has brought county officials into the association's advocacy efforts. CAP members work alongside the WCA Government Affairs Team to educate legislators and state agency officials about counties' vital role.

Effective advocacy is about more than explaining what counties do. County officials bring firsthand knowledge of what happens when laws and budget decisions reach the local level — how they affect mental health services, road projects, county jails, public health departments, or the many other services counties provide every day. Those conversations put a local face on statewide issues and help legislators understand why county priorities matter.

The 2027–28 legislative session will bring new challenges and new opportunities. We need county officials to speak up and advocate for county government services. Watch for more information in the coming months about how to join the WCA CAP Team and make your voice heard. □

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Continuing Resolution Funds Government Through Dec. 11 and Delays OMB Rule

Adapted from information by the National Association of Counties

On Sept. 2, President Donald Trump signed a continuing resolution to fund the federal government at fiscal year (FY) 2026 levels through Dec. 11, or until Congress approves the FY 2027 appropriations — whichever comes first. The continuing resolution also includes targeted funding allocations, rescissions and program-specific provisions.

One key provision delays implementation of an Office of Management and Budget (OMB) rule until Dec. 11. The new rule would overhaul the Uniform Guidance that governs how federal grants are administered by, among other changes, requiring political appointees to approve all federal grants and allowing grants to be rescinded at any time. The delay marks a major win for counties. To learn more about the rule, visit bit.ly/NACo_OMB.

► Other key provisions for counties in the continuing resolution

Agriculture

- Allows for necessary spending to accommodate approved applications for farm ownership loans under the Agricultural Credit Insurance Fund Program
- Extends the Livestock Mandatory Reporting program until Dec. 11 and provides budget increases to maintain operations and extensions for the program

Nutrition Assistance Programs

- Continues Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) funding at current program levels
- Allows for necessary spending to maintain participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)
- Allows for necessary spending to maintain current caseloads for the Commodity Assistance Program

Housing

- Authorizes the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to use unobligated funds from certain tenant-based rental assistance accounts to prevent shortfalls in core Housing Choice Voucher renewals; this does not include HUD-VASH vouchers or family unification program vouchers
- Authorizes HUD to use tenant protection vouchers to support households impacted by expiring Emergency Housing vouchers
- Extends availability of homelessness assistance grant funding (such as Continuum of Care and Emergency Solutions Grant funding) through FY 2027
- Authorizes nearly \$6.3 million in competitive funding through FY 2029 to forgive or restructure flexible subsidy (Flex Sub) loans for small, nonprofit-owned affordable housing properties

2030 Census: A County Census Toolkit

The U.S. decennial census is mandated by the U.S. Constitution and conducted every 10 years to determine the number of people living in the United States. It shapes political representation and drives the distribution of over \$2.8 trillion in annual federal funding across hundreds of programs.

Funding allocations for county-administered programs and services depend heavily on census data. The 2030 Census will impact vital county functions, from transportation and infrastructure to public health, public safety and social services.

Counts affect federal resources flowing to county residents for a full decade.

County officials are uniquely positioned to drive preparation through participatory opportunities and tools such as the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) Program, creation of Complete Count Committees (CCCs), the 2030 Census Planning Timeline and more.

The National Association of Counties released a toolkit available at naco.org/resource/2030-census-toolkit-counties to help county officials prepare for the next census. □



Transportation

- Allows for necessary payments to air carriers to maintain Essential Air Service programs
- Rescinds remaining unspent allocations for highway infrastructure and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) research and development
- Does not extend advance appropriations through Division J of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act; overall transportation funding would be significantly cut unless new appropriations are made

Energy & Environment

- Allows for necessary spending to maintain the planned launch schedule for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration weather satellite system GeoXO
- Allows for necessary spending to support wildfire management and suppression activities
- Allows for necessary spending for the Federal Emergency Management Agency Disaster Relief Fund to comply with the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act
- Extends the National Flood Insurance Program until Dec. 11 and provides budget increases to maintain operations and extensions for the program

New Mail-In Ballot Requirements Proposed

On August 26, the U.S. Postal Service released its final rule, effective August 21, imposing new mandates on how states must conduct mail-in and absentee ballot voting for federal elections following a directive in the White House's Executive Order 14399. The rule creates new mail-in ballot requirements and establishes a new national online portal, controlled by the chief state election official, requiring authorized elections administrators to register all voters receiving a mail-in ballot.

However, the final rule's implementation is still under question, as it is currently making its way through the court system. As of this writing, the Wisconsin Elections Commission has advised clerks that the rule is not in effect, and they should not take any steps to comply without a specific directive from the commission. □

Finance

- Allows for necessary spending to accommodate increased demand for the Small Business Administration loans program

Government Operations

- Allows for necessary spending for the Census Bureau to continue preparations for the 2030 Census
- Allows for necessary spending to prevent furloughs and reimburse federal grantees that used other funds for federal programs or furloughed employees during the FY 2026 government shutdown

For a more extensive list of the continuing resolution provisions, visit [NACo.org](https://naco.org).

Attention now turns to the FY 2027 spending bills. Visit NACo's FY 2027 Appropriations Tracker at naco.org/resource/2027-appropriations-tracker to learn more about the status of the appropriation bills and county funding priorities. ■



USDA Announces New Plan to Modernize Agricultural Data

On Sept. 1, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced its Data Modernization Plan to improve agricultural data and increase transparency.

The Data Modernization Plan is organized around four pillars: modernizing the data reporting experience, enhancing acreage and yield estimation, integrating data and technology platforms, and expanding trust and transparency with producers. Through these pillars, the USDA plans to:

- Improve the use of administrative data from USDA agencies to prevent requests for data already submitted
- Redesign mobile surveys and other interfaces to be more user-friendly and explore opportunities to use pre-filled survey data
- Review data collection practices and technology infrastructure with external experts
- Conduct a pilot to evaluate the use of emerging technologies to enhance acreage and yield estimates
- Modernize USDA's technology infrastructure, expand data-sharing capabilities, and evaluate how AI and machine learning can be integrated
- Engage with agricultural partners, such as state departments of agriculture, producer organizations and land-grant universities □



LEGAL ISSUES RELATING TO COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Who Decides?

The Intersecting Authority of County Highway Commissioners and Committees

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

County highway commissioners and county highway committees play key roles in maintaining Wisconsin's transportation system. Their authority varies and intersects differently, depending on whether the county board has chosen the executive, administrator or administrative coordinator form of county government.¹ As a result, it may be challenging to know “who decides” on matters such as whether a project moves forward, certain equipment is purchased, or road supplies are sold to another municipality. This can be especially challenging as counties transition from an administrative coordinator form of county government to an executive or administrator form.

In this article, we break down the roles, authority, obligations, and responsibilities of highway commissioners and highway committees under the different forms of county government.

► **Wis. Stat. Ch. 83: County highways and unique statutory authority**

County highway operations hold a unique place in county government because their statutory authority comes from both Chapters 59 and 83 in the Wisconsin Statutes.

In counties with a population of 750,000 or less that utilize an executive or administrator form of county government, the executive or administrator appoints and supervises the county highway commissioner.² The county

board must confirm the appointment unless the board adopts an ordinance waiving confirmation.³ Importantly, the county highway commissioner has administrative powers and duties prescribed for the county highway committee pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 83.015. These duties are discussed in greater detail below. [Wis. Stat. § 83.01(b) sets forth particular requirements for counties with a population of 750,000 or greater. Those requirements exceed the scope of this article.]

In counties with the administrative coordinator form of government, the county highway commissioner is selected by the county board and supervised by the county highway committee. In these counties, the county highway commissioner does not have the administrative powers and duties prescribed for the county highway committee by statute. Rather, the county highway committee maintains those powers and duties.

► **“Universal” county highway commissioner duties, but under whose supervision?**

Some county highway commissioner duties apply regardless of the form of county government. Those tasks are set forth in Wis. Stat. § 83.01(7) and include:

- Have charge of the construction of highways built with county aid and of the maintenance of all highways maintained by the county;⁴
- Perform all duties required by the county board,

The county form of government determines the county highway commissioner's additional duties, and whether the commissioner steps into the shoes of the highway committee to perform the extensive duties set forth in Wis. Stat. § 83.015.

and complete all necessary engineering and examinations for the establishment, construction, improvement and maintenance of highways;⁵ and

- Have charge of all county road machinery and tools, and be responsible for the proper maintenance, storage and repair of the road machinery and tools, and make an annual report to the county board showing a full inventory of such machinery and tools.⁶

While a county highway commissioner must perform these duties regardless of the form of county government, the form of county government determines whether the highway commissioner performs these duties under the direction of the county highway committee or under the supervision and direction of the executive or administrator.⁷

► Form of county government and determination of county highway commissioner duties

The county form of government determines the county highway commissioner's additional duties, and whether the commissioner steps into the shoes of the highway committee to perform the extensive duties set forth in Wis. Stat. § 83.015. In counties with an administrative coordinator, the county highway committee maintains the authority to administer most of the county highway department operations, and is responsible for performing the duties set forth in Wis. Stat. § 83.015, including:

- Determine whether county aid construction shall be let by contract or shall be done by day labor;
- Enter into contracts on behalf of the county;
- Enter private lands with their employees to remove weeds and brush and erect or remove fences that

are necessary to keep highways open for travel during the winter;

- Direct the expenditure of highway maintenance funds received from the state or provided by county tax;
- Audit all payrolls and material claims and vouchers resulting from the construction of highways;
- Perform other duties imposed by law or by the county board;⁸ and
- Sell road building and maintenance supplies on an open account to any city, village, town or school district within the county; and any such city, village, town or school district is authorized to purchase such supplies.⁹

In counties with an executive or administrator form of county government, the executive or administrator appoints and supervises the highway commissioner, who performs the duties set forth in Wis. Stat. §§ 83.01(7) and 83.015 (referenced above) as well as additional statutory duties, including those set forth in Wis. Stat. § 32.05, Wis. Stat. Ch. 84, and Wis. Stat. Ch. 86.

Given the expansion of the highway commissioner's duties under the executive and administrator forms of government, a logical question is whether the highway committee has any remaining authority or role in the highway department administration. The answer is simple in that Wis. Stat. § 83.015(2)(b) provides that the county highway committee's role is as a "policy-making body determining the broad outlines and principles governing administration" of the county highway department.¹⁰ The policy decisions are legislative determinations, and

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LEGAL ISSUES

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by overseeing the highway program, the highway committee still acts as a key connection with the county board. The highway commissioner is the professional tasked with implementing those policies.

► Conclusion

The form of county government plays a unique role in determining the roles and responsibilities of a county highway commissioner and a county highway committee. In times of increased transportation needs and potential decreased funding, the roles and responsibilities of administrative oversight by the highway commissioner and highway committee are key considerations in the operation of a county highway program. ■

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. § 59.17 (County Executive); Wis. Stat. § 59.18 (County Administrator); and Wis. Stat. § 59.19 (County Administrative Coordinator).
2. Wis. Stat. § 83.01(c).
3. *Id.*
4. Wis. Stat. § 83.01(7)(a).
5. Wis. Stat. § 83.01(7)(b).
6. Wis. Stat. § 83.01(7)(c).
7. Wis. Stat. § 83.01(7)(a).
8. Wis. Stat. § 83.015(2)(a).
9. Wis. Stat. § 83.015(2)(a).
10. Wis. Stat. § 83.01(7)(b).

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