ABOUT US

The Wisconsin Policy Forum is a statewide nonpartisan, independent policy research organization. We provide informed analysis of critical policy issues affecting local governments, school districts, and the state of Wisconsin. Through research and facilitation activities, we encourage elected officials and community leaders to find effective, data-driven solutions to pressing policy challenges, and promote productive discussion among the public and private sectors.

OUR MISSION

We conduct impartial public policy research and analysis to drive informed debate and effective decision-making in the state of Wisconsin.

OUR PURPOSE

We bring to light new knowledge on policy issues important to state government, local governments, schools, Metro Milwaukee, and Wisconsin’s economy, then disseminate it to thought leaders and decision-makers.

We analyze and publish information about the finances of state and local governments and school districts to increase awareness of fiscal and service-level challenges and promote efficient, effective, and equitable use of taxpayer dollars.
At the start of 2020, the Forum launched a newly developed strategic plan that was created to guide our organization for the next three to five years. Among our key initiatives were efforts to expand our membership and reach in Greater Madison, tap into a growing demand for our service sharing and fiscal research, and continue to expand our growing statewide influence and credibility with solutions-based policy reports. We also announced plans for a Night of Nonpartisanship gala dinner timed for a month before the presidential election.

Then the pandemic hit and our best laid plans were placed on hold, at least temporarily. As the fight against COVID-19 changed our daily lives, we immediately redesigned our research portfolio and priorities to focus almost exclusively on providing policymakers and citizens with objective analysis that was directly connected to the critical new policy concerns facing our communities and our state.

It is hard to exaggerate how impressed I have been by the efforts of our staff to respond to the pandemic and its impacts on Wisconsin. Their ability to quickly pivot to a COVID 19-focused research agenda and produce report after report after report on the pandemic’s impacts set a new standard of excellence for our organization and helped promote concrete action on many fronts.

We produced a remarkable 58 research publications in 2020 on a mix of both local and statewide policy issues. We also saw several important research findings and recommendations lead to action and we engaged hundreds of members and supporters at our wider array of policy events, albeit virtually.

Indeed, the Forum’s critical role in our state as a source of expert, nonpartisan policy analysis and advice has never been more apparent.

As I enter my first year as Board Chair, I look forward to working closely with the Forum’s highly respected staff, Vice Chairs Grady Crosby and Cindy Rooks, our Board officers, and all of our members and supporters to ensure that the Forum continues to be both viable and vibrant in achieving its mission. In this era of extreme partisanship, to have an organization like the Wisconsin Policy Forum providing impartial public policy research and analysis is truly critical for our state.

Sincerely,

Leigh Riley
Chair
The Forum urges local governments to measure performance and share results and applies the same principle to itself. Forum staff and the executive committee establish performance objectives and use these metrics – and many others – to gauge our impact and effectiveness.
Our research publications address timely issues and promote informed and fact-based public policy decision-making. Our portfolio includes in-depth reports, Focus policy briefs, and The Wisconsin Taxpayer magazine-style pieces that cover a range of topics. Per our strategic plan, our priority research areas include government finance, workforce and economic development, and education. Also, we maintain the traditions of our two legacy organizations -- the Public Policy Forum and Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance — by emphasizing both issues of statewide importance and those with particular relevance to southeast Wisconsin.

In 2020, after the COVID-19 crisis emerged, we pivoted to research topics that were directly relevant to the pandemic. Our analyses of fiscal impacts on municipalities, counties, school districts, and state government received extensive media coverage across Wisconsin and we presented them (virtually) to hundreds of business leaders, policymakers, and citizens. Additionally, our targeted reports on challenges involving the child care and arts and culture sectors helped initiate direct action by state leaders.

On the following pages, we highlight report covers from some of our most highly publicized in-depth reports in 2020 as well as key visuals from several Focus and Taxpayer publications.

**ECONOMIC & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

**Milwaukee’s Gender Pay Gap Narrows But Persists**

![Graph showing narrowing of pay gap, 2010-2018](image)

*Figure 1: Narrowing of Pay Gap, 2010-2018*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Region</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
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<td>Milwaukee County</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waukesha County</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
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*Women’s Earnings as a % of Men’s*
EDUCATION

State’s College Readiness Slips

By the Book:
How Wisconsin’s libraries are adapting in 2020 and beyond

K-12 Trends Offer Caution as Tough Budget Choices Loom

Wisconsin School Referenda Rise above Economy, Politics
**GOVERNMENT FINANCE**

**Tax Burden Falls Again**

**Rise in Online Home Rentals Creates Taxing Dilemma**

**Tuning In To Video Fees**

**A High-Level Look at Police Funding Trends in Wisconsin**

**Could State Close the GAP?**

**State’s Share of Public Spending Rises**
Wrong Way: Black auto deaths up in Wisconsin

No Contest: Local Spring Elections Feature Few Choices for Wisconsin Voters

School Tax Levies Rise But Pace Slows

State Increases Auditors - And Corporate Collections

State’s Budget Challenges Come into Focus

Other Reports

Local Government’s Role in Milwaukee’s Environmental Sustainability

Above the Rim - A high level look of Milwaukee’s youth sports landscape

Black Wisconsin auto fatality rates diverge

Cities More Competitive

Growth in Property Taxes Fairly Steady Amid Pandemic

Total Expenditure for all Major Franchises Operated by ECI, 2014-2020
Ready for Recession?
Recent financial gains will help but may not be enough

COVID-19’s Impact on Jobs in Wisconsin

The COVID-19 Fiscal Fall Out for Cities and Villages

“Really have appreciated reading and then hearing the supportive echo through the media about your report on the arts and culture existential crisis.”

GEORGE TZOUOGROS
Executive Director of Wisconsin Arts Board
State of Emergency:
How legislatures are responding to the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 Fiscal Fall-Out for Counties

Changing Traffic Patterns During COVID-19

Amid Crisis, Voters Again Support More Money for Schools

Uncertainty Ahead: School Finances in the Face of COVID-19
Wisconsin’s Digital Divide and its Impacts on Learning

The Online Effect: Shift to Internet Retailers Benefits Income Taxpayers Not Budget

Jobless Claims Tax State, But Not Yet Employers

Wisconsin’s Child Care Sector Needs Care Itself

Arts and Culture in a Pandemic: An existential threat

Healthier City Reserves Could Cushion the Blow of COVID-19
Rise in Foodshare Another Indicator of Pandemic’s Toll

Serving State Facilities:
A look at how cities are reimbursed

Alcohol, Speeding Deaths Fuel Increase in Crash Fatalities

“Your timely information during the COVID-19 crisis has been outstanding! Thank you!”

TERRI PHILLIPS
Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance
Our budget briefs provide information about the government’s basic financial framework, the specific expenditure and revenue challenges facing the government that year, and how the proposed budget resolves them. We objectively frame the key issues and decisions that are at the heart of the budget. In 2020, we expanded our portfolio to include the Madison Metropolitan School District.
Our collection of DataTools bolsters the Forum’s role as a go-to source for understanding local and state government policy and workforce issues in Wisconsin. Our Municipal DataTool includes data on all 601 cities and villages in the state, while our Property Values and Taxes DataTool shows how property values change from year to year in municipalities and counties across the state and how those changes are impacting the taxes levied by local units of government. Our School DataTool compiles academic performance and financial data for Wisconsin public school districts and allows users to run their own comparative reports.
The Forum is widely respected by government and school district leaders for our objectivity and expertise, and we are often called upon to facilitate collaboration discussions among different government entities or to analyze opportunities for service sharing and consolidation. In 2020, we produced four service sharing reports covering communities and governments in Jefferson, La Crosse, and Milwaukee counties. We also continued our prominent role as a research arm for the Johnson Foundation at Wingspread’s Resilient Communities initiative in Greater Racine, which seeks to promote greater collaboration among municipal leaders in that region.
Connecting our work with the broadest possible audience – which we do through the news media and social media – maximizes our impact and furthers our goal of anchoring state policy deliberations in impartial facts and data. In 2020 our research was cited nearly 350 times in local, state and national news outlets, and news media routinely sought out Forum researchers as expert sources. Our social media accounts combined had more than 5,100 followers at the end of 2020.
We communicate our research in many ways, including via presentations to our members. Forum members, civic groups, elected officials, and advocacy groups request Forum staff to speak on our research or related policy issues.

We organize exclusive policy discussions and brown bag lunches for our members, and our researchers always are available to answer policy-related questions.

We connect our members with individuals in government, academia, and elsewhere to obtain policy information and analysis that is critical to their work.

We encourage Forum members to serve on our policy committees: Government Finance, Economic Development, Education, Social Services. Our policy committees meet a few times each year to review research findings and discuss potential new research topics with Forum staff.
More than 200 people attended our 2020 annual meeting on January 21. Our program featured a Milwaukee County Executive candidate debate that was moderated by Forum President Rob Henken. We also highlighted our 2019 organizational accomplishments, previewed 2020 research topics, and highlighted key points in our newly unveiled strategic plan. We formally swore in our officers, new directors, and directors renewing their board terms.
Like many spring 2020 in-person events, our City of Milwaukee Mayoral Debate moved online and was held on March 30. Forum President Rob Henken conducted back-to-back 30-minute live discussions with Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and State Senator Lena Taylor and challenged the candidates to address the critical issues facing the city.
When the pandemic hit and it became clear that our in-person events would be suspended for the foreseeable future, we developed a new virtual webinar series, Forum Friday, which featured discussions by public policy leaders on a recently released Forum report or a timely policy issue. While these virtual events will never replace our in-person events, they are a great way to keep Wisconsinites informed and connected on our state’s most pressing public policy issues.

**K12 Digital Divide & School Finance**

Senior Education Researcher Anne Chapman and President Rob Henken discussed key findings from our research on K-12 schools. These included: how the COVID-19 crisis could affect school finances; 2021 Milwaukee and Madison school district budgets; and, how the pandemic could worsen the state’s digital divide for students. Alan Borsuk, senior fellow at Marquette Law School, longtime Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter and columnist and noted Milwaukee-area education expert, joined the discussion.

**PANELISTS:**

- **Alan Borsuk**, Senior Fellow at Marquette Law School and Milwaukee Journal Sentinel columnist
- **Rob Henken**, President, Wisconsin Policy Forum
- **Anne Chapman**, Senior Researcher, Wisconsin Policy Forum
Investigating Police Budgets

President Rob Henken discussed our recent report on statewide police spending trends and our analyses of police budgets in Milwaukee. City of Milwaukee Alderman Michael Murphy, who chairs the city’s Finance and Personnel Committee, shared his thoughts on the outlook for the Milwaukee Police Department’s 2021 budget. We asked Reggie Moore, director of Milwaukee’s Office of Violence Prevention, to speak to his office’s activities and where additional investments ideally would be made to address societal factors that contribute to crime and reduce economic opportunity.

PANELISTS:
Reggie Moore, Director, Office of Violence Prevention, City of Milwaukee
Michael Murphy, Alderman, City of Milwaukee
Rob Henken, President, Wisconsin Policy Forum

The COVID-19 Child Care Conundrum

Researcher Betsy Mueller discussed our report on how the COVID-19 pandemic upended Wisconsin’s child care sector, creating huge challenges for children and families seeking high-quality care and for businesses seeking to reopen. Wisconsin Department of Children and Families Secretary Emilie Amundson gave her take on the severity of the challenge and possible public sector responses, while Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce President Tim Sheehy shared his thoughts on what’s at stake for businesses and whether policymakers need to intervene.

PANELISTS:
Emilie Amundson, Secretary, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families
Tim Sheehy, President, Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce
Betsy Mueller, Researcher, Wisconsin Policy Forum
Is Southeast Wisconsin Ready to Confront its Affordable Housing Challenges?

Senior Researcher Joe Peterangelo discussed our report on the city of Milwaukee’s affordable housing efforts. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Ideas Lab reporter James Causey discussed his reporting on metro Milwaukee’s troubled history with this issue; and Racine County Executive Jonathan Delagrave explained his county’s efforts to address this challenge, including its efforts to expand housing options to accommodate new economic growth.

**PANELISTS:**
- James Causey, Ideas Lab reporter, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
- Jonathan Delagrave, County Executive, Racine County
- Joe Peterangelo, Senior Researcher, Wisconsin Policy Forum

Budgets in a Pandemic: The Bottom Line for Madison and Milwaukee

President Rob Henken and Research Director Jason Stein discussed our city of Milwaukee and city of Madison budget briefs. Madison Common Council President Sheri Carter and Milwaukee Common Council President Cavalier Johnson shared their thoughts and insights on their respective cities’ 2021 budgets and overall fiscal conditions.

**PANELISTS:**
- Sheri Carter, President, Madison Common Council President
- Cavalier Johnson, President, Milwaukee Common Council
The Salute to Local Government is one of the few events in our state that highlights the value of public sector performance and the benefits that public sector innovation and excellence bring to taxpayers and our state as a whole. Attendees from across the state tuned in to our virtual Salute to Local Government to join us in celebrating excellence in government and to hear from our keynote speaker, Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley. While the pandemic required that we reimagine this year’s awards program, it did not stop us from recognizing all of our local governments, school districts, and individual public sector employees who have gone the extra mile and sacrificed for the common good in 2020.

JEAN B. TYLER LEADER OF THE FUTURE AWARD

Abby Attoun
Director of Planning and Community Development, City of Middleton

JAMES R. RYAN LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Dianne Robertson
Retired Administrator/Clerk/Treasurer, Village of Thiensville

NORMAN N. GILL AWARD FOR INDIVIDUAL EXCELLENCE

Dale Peters
City Manager, City of Eau Claire
INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING
Public Safety Department | Village of Palmyra

INNOVATIVE USE OF DATA AND TECHNOLOGY
Park Place Performs | City of Janesville

INTERGOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION
Barton School Apartments | Washington County
Honorable Mention: Milwaukee County Unified Emergency Operations Center | Milwaukee County and its 19 municipalities

PUBLIC-PRIVATE COOPERATION
Milwaukee Employment Renovation/Renovation Initiative | City of Milwaukee Department of City Development & Wisconsin Department of Financial Institutions
In 2020, we added two award categories to highlight the unprecedented pandemic-related challenges facing local governments and school districts across the state. Our “Effective Response to COVID-19 Challenge” award recognized an innovative and effective response by a government or school district to a challenge created by the pandemic, while our “Excellence Under Pressure” award honored a non-elected government or school district employee for exceptional pandemic-related work.

Effective Response to COVID-19
Public Health & City Clerk’s Office | City of Madison

Honorable Mention: NR Strong | City of New Richmond

Excellence Under Pressure
TJ McCray | Director of Instructional and Library Media Services, Madison Metropolitan School District

TankThink produced this year’s video vignettes of our winners and the virtual event. TankThink is a media production company dedicated to strengthening cultural ecosystems by creating meaningful media to push the greater good forward.
The Forum has been a member of the Governmental Research Association (GRA), which was founded in 1914 as the national organization of entities engaged in governmental research. Senior Researcher Joe Peterangelo has served on the GRA board of directors for four years, and President Rob Henken is a past president of GRA.

We award fellowships annually to two graduate students who are studying in Wisconsin to conduct research projects. The fellows work under the guidance of Forum staff and their work is published as Forum research products.

**2019-2020**
- **Todd A. Berry Fellow**
  - Chalisa Sims
- **Norman N. Gill Fellow**
  - Joe Krivichi

**2020-2021**
- **Todd A. Berry Fellow**
  - Maddie Hahn
- **Norman N. Gill Fellow**
  - Angela Thai
The Wisconsin Policy Forum’s financial condition remains strong, despite a global pandemic that has wreaked havoc on our economy. The financial resiliency we demonstrated in 2020 stems from the generosity of our members and supporters; the creativity and hard work of our staff; and, perhaps most of all, the importance of our mission.

Our ability to absorb some temporary financial hits also reflects the importance of the merger we implemented three years ago between the former Public Policy Forum and the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Our reserves remain robust and provide reassurance and stability during a year like 2020 when some key revenue streams -- like membership and event income -- were threatened.

Overall, our unaudited results show we ran a small operating deficit in 2020, with about $1.37 million in unaudited operating revenue and $1.39 million in unaudited operating expenditures. However, that deficit was more than erased with $580,000 of investment earnings. Key to our 2020 financial performance was a nearly $200,000 PPP loan we received from the Small Business Administration, which was forgiven in its entirety.

The budget is overseen by the Forum’s Finance and Executive Committees, which receive frequent and periodic reports. Unaudited totals show that in 2020, just over 39% of the Forum’s operating revenue came from grants and contracts from foundations, nonprofits, and governments, which support specific research projects or areas of research. Roughly 31% of operating revenue came from membership dues, which support discretionary research projects and activities deemed important by the staff and directors.

We are pleased to report that we were able to surpass our revenue targets for grants and contracts. We also exceeded our goal for individual contributions, with our Chairman’s Club generating nearly $70,000 in discretionary revenue. Revenue from membership renewals was down about 15% from the amount budgeted, but after lagging in the early months of the pandemic it recovered substantially later in the year.
CHAIRMAN’S CLUB

The Chairman’s Club was established in 2016 to help build financial capacity to support the Forum’s core mission and enhance its communications. These generous supporters receive complimentary admission to all Forum events and are invited to private receptions at great venues featuring prominent speakers. Many thanks to these members who support the Forum through direct donations or bequests.

Jennifer Abele
Ian Abston
James Barry
Grady Crosby
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Katherine Gehl
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Moira Fallucca
Katherine Gehl
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We also enjoy support from hundreds of individuals across the state.