

WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM



ANNUAL REPORT

OUR PURPOSE

We bring to light new facts on policy issues important to state government, local governments, schools, Metro Milwaukee, and Wisconsin's economy, then disseminate these insights to decision-makers and the general public.

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.

OUR MISSION

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

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.



FROM THE CHAIR

As I embark on my first year as Board Chair of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, I feel proud of our impact in 2024 and am committed to continuing our legacy through 2025 and beyond.

Last year, we published 54 reports and briefs that led to more than 530 stories in Wisconsin media outlets and nearly 50 public presentations to government bodies and other groups. Those media hits and public appearances helped disseminate our research to the general public and state and local elected officials, as did our growing presence on social media.

Some of our 2024 research highlights include a deep dive into the Milwaukee Public Schools' historic referendum in April and a broader look at education challenges facing MPS, independent charter, and private choice programs in Milwaukee. In the summer, we published a report on the sustainability of Milwaukee's performing arts sector, and we continued to delve into the topic of affordable housing. Once again, our work received national recognition from the Governmental Research Association.

We also held a total of nine in-person and virtual events in 2024, the highlight being our Salute to Local Government, which enjoyed near-record attendance of over 460 people.

We did all this while undergoing a leadership transition in which long-time Forum head Rob Henken stepped into his current role of Immediate Past President after more than 16 years leading our organization. He was succeeded as Forum President by our former Vice President and Research Director, Jason Stein. Then-senior researchers Joe Peterangelo and Sara Shaw became our Research Director and Deputy Research Director, respectively, and Elizabeth Cizinsky started as our Director of Business and Community Operations.

We are immensely grateful to Rob for leading the Forum through its 2018 merger and helping to grow our reputation across Wisconsin, and we are excited to see where the Forum goes next.

Our finances remain strong, with membership contributions and contract research revenues exceeding our budget. Our financial stability reflects the generosity of our hundreds of members and supporters and the value they place in our work, as well as the growing demand for our expertise and services.

In the year ahead, I look forward to working with our staff and all of you to help inform decision-making across our state, from Milwaukee city hall to the state Capitol in Madison, and in cities, counties, and school districts throughout our state. Thank you for your support of Wisconsin's premier policy think tank!



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K Munson'.

Kenneth Munson
Chairman

BY THE NUMBERS

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.



“I’m writing to you as a voter today, not in my role at the Society. I wanted to let you know that as a voter, I greatly appreciate what I view to be an objective assessment of the (Milwaukee Public Schools) referendum at hand. Having objective information is critical for voters as I am only seeing the ads for those “for” and those “against”. I needed a way to make my own assessment and your articles have helped me do that.”

JODI GIBSON

President and CEO, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

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University of Wisconsin -
Madison

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s.c.

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Mueller Communications

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Medical College of Wisconsin,
Milwaukee County Office of
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Advocate Aurora

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Paula Pennebaker

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Cindy Rooks

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RESEARCH

Our researchers help inform the public and drive better public policy through in-depth reports, intermediate-length *Taxpayer* pieces, *Focus* policy briefs, and interactive data packages.

Per our strategic plan, we focus on government finances, workforce and economic development, and education, examining statewide issues as well as those with particular relevance to southeast Wisconsin and Dane County.

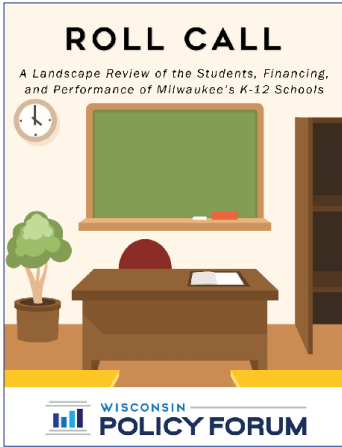
Our 2024 reports included a deep dive into the issue of Medicaid expansion, a review of local road quality across Wisconsin, and an exploration of how partnerships might help rescue the Milwaukee County Parks. One of our state's most pressing current topics, the cost of housing, resulted in a series of reports on its causes, impact, and potential solutions.

On the following pages, we highlight report covers from some of our most highly publicized in-depth studies in 2024 as well as key visuals from several *Focus* and *Taxpayer* publications.



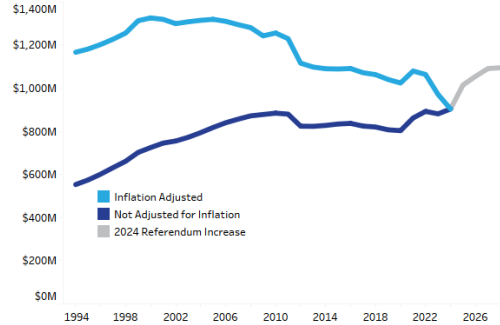
Research Director Joe Peterangelo presenting at our May Viewpoint Luncheon on transportation

EDUCATION RESEARCH



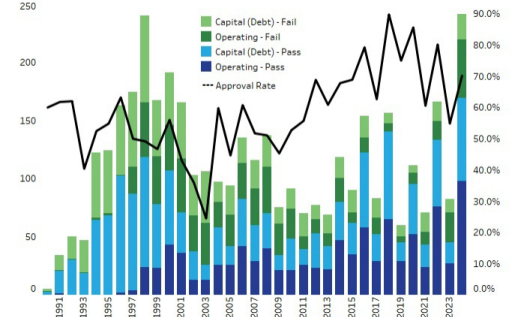
The ABCs of the 2024 MPS Referendum

Large Referendum Would Roll Back Effects of Enrollment Losses, Inflation
Milwaukee Public Schools funding from revenue limits and per pupil aid combined in millions



Wisconsin Sets More Referenda Records to Fund Schools

Despite Declining Approval Rate, More School District Referenda Than Ever Pass in 2024
Number of sch. district referenda held (left y-axis) vs approval rate of sch. district referenda (right y-axis)



“This looks exactly like what we were hoping for. We are very appreciative of the work and timeline in which it was created. We work with many vendors and consultants... it never goes this well.”

JAKE KONRATH

Superintendent, Sheboygan Area School District

NOT PICTURED

Chronic Absenteeism Persists in All Corners of Wisconsin

FAFSA Delays Hit Vulnerable Students Hardest

School Referenda Passage Rates Remain Low

Who's Driving the Bus?

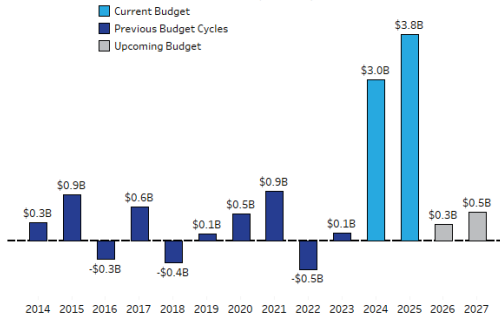
Understanding Technical College Funding in Wisconsin

GOVERNMENT FINANCE RESEARCH

Moving Back to Budget Basics

Budget Projections Are Positive but Smaller Than Current Budget

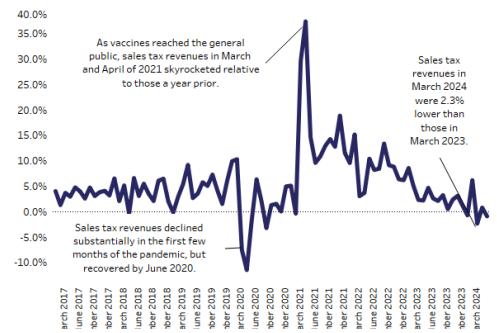
Projected general fund revenues minus select net appropriations (agency requests excluded)
in millions (current \$)



Sales Tax Revenues Begin to Slow

State Sales Tax Growth Slows

Change in state sales tax revenues relative to same month one yr prior, Jan 2017 to May 2024



NOT PICTURED

School Levies Rise More Rapidly, County Levies Slow Down

State Tax Ranking Hits All-Time Low

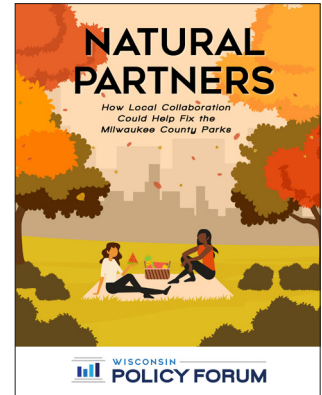
Who Will Decide How Federal Funds Are Spent?

Changing Communications Landscape Raises Taxing Questions

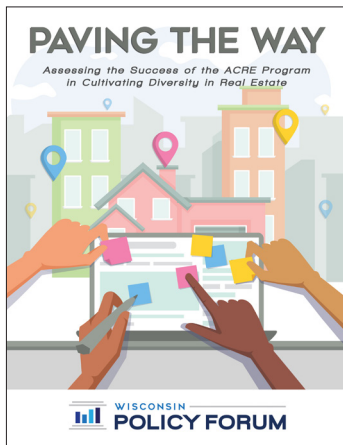
Under Construction

A High Water Mark for State Budget?

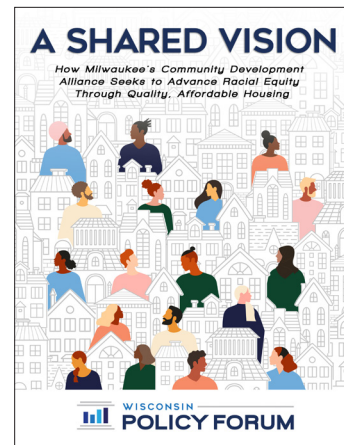
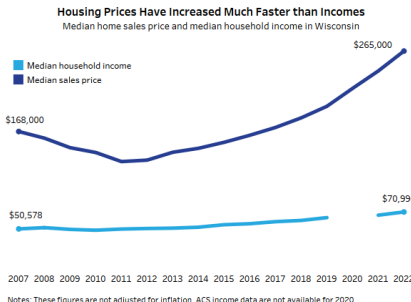
Eyes on the Road



ECONOMIC & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH



Home Prices Outpace Incomes



“I just wanted to say the “Eyes on the Road” piece was excellent. I’ve suggested we use it in our communication with our elected officials and the public and I’ll certainly refer to it (in the future.) Great use of data and the issue is well-explained. Keep up the great work!”

JOHN RUGGINI

Finance Director, City of Wauwatosa

NOT PICTURED

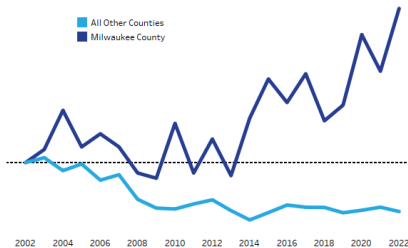
Job Recovery in Wisconsin Robust but Unequal
Housing Permitting Slows, Adding to Affordability Concerns

Recovery Continues for Restaurants and Bars
On Solid Ground
The Value of Higher Education

OTHER RESEARCH

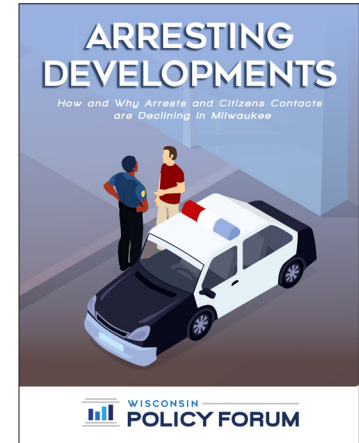
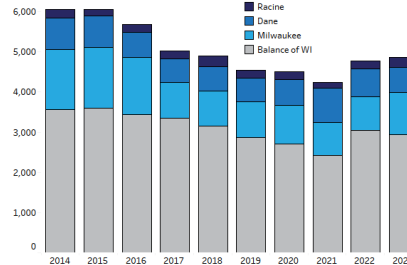
Traffic Deaths Surge in Milwaukee County While Falling Elsewhere

Auto Fatalities Double in Milwaukee, But Decline for Balance of State
Percentage change since 2002 in auto fatalities by year, Milwaukee versus all other Wisconsin counties



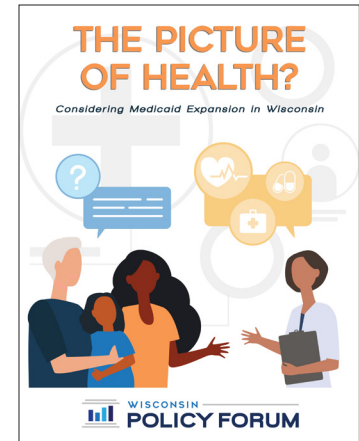
Homeless Population Edges Back Up

Homelessness Falls For Years, Rises in the Wake of COVID
Annual count of homeless individuals by region

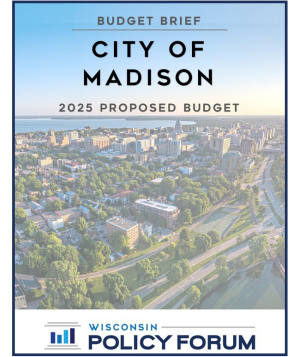
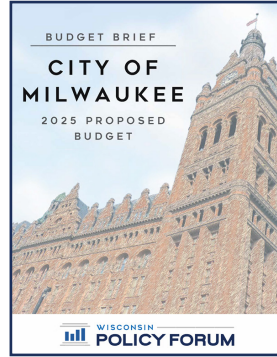
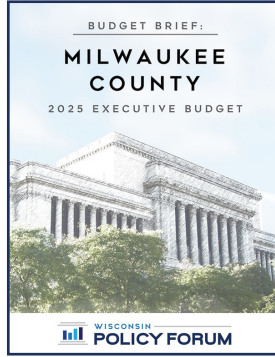
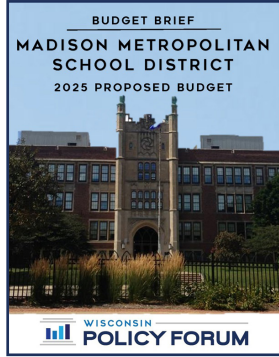
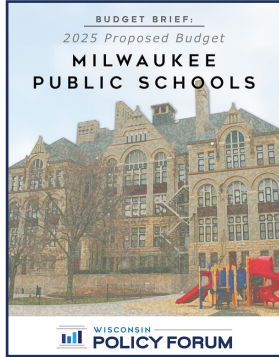


NOT PICTURED

Wisconsin Outpaces Most States in Recent Dam Failures
Staying Engaged in Outdoor Pursuits
FoodShare Use Remains High Post Pandemic
Common Ground
Curtain Time
Healthy Investment



BUDGET BRIEFS



Our budget briefs **provide information about the government's basic finances, the specific budget 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 - not only for citizens, but also for policymakers themselves. We add a brief on the Governor's proposed state budget in each odd-numbered year.

DATATOOLS

Our collection of DataTools bolsters the Forum's role as a go-to source for understanding local government and K-12 policy as well as economic issues in Wisconsin.



MUNICIPAL DATATOOL includes data on all 604 cities and villages in the state and allows users to run their own comparative report.

PROPERTY VALUES & TAXES DATATOOL shows how property values and taxes change from year to year in municipalities and counties across the state.

SCHOOL DATATOOL compiles academic performance and financial data for Wisconsin public school districts and allows users to run their own comparative reports.

METRO MILWAUKEE INNOVATION DATATOOL enables users to gauge the area's performance on indicators tied to innovation and economic growth.



IN THE NEWS

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 and local policy deliberations in impartial facts and data.

In 2024, our research was cited more than 500 times in local, state, and national news outlets, and news media routinely sought out Forum researchers as expert sources. Our social media accounts had more than 8,000 followers combined at the end of 2024.



Senior Research Associate Tyler Byrnes is interviewed by Channel 3000 for our brief on the state's tax burden.



President Jason Stein appears on *Here & Now*, PBS Wisconsin to discuss our 2024 Property Values and Taxes DataTool.

MEDIA COVERAGE

DAILY
REPORTER

 **THE CAP TIMES**
— Madison, Wisconsin —

 **The
Center
Square**

BizTimes
MILWAUKEE BUSINESS NEWS

THE 74



TELEGRAM
SUPERIOR

**Green Bay
Press Gazette.**



TIME

JSONLINE.COM
**MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN
JOURNAL SENTINEL**
PULITZER PRIZE WINNER 2008 • 2010 • 2011

WISCONSIN
STATE JOURNAL



 **Beloit
Daily
News**
The Stateline's Choice

LEADER-TELEGRAM

 **The Minnesota
Star Tribune**

WUWM 89.7
MILWAUKEE'S 

**Hudson
Star-Observer**



WHBY
103.5 FM 1150 AM 106.3 FM
REAL. LOCAL. RADIO.

 **TELEMUNDO
WISCONSIN**



**The
Guardian**



**Stevens Point
Journal**
PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

WASHINGTON
Examiner

 **wxpr**
LOCAL • PUBLIC • RADIO

91.7 RHINELANDER
91.9 WAUSAU
100.9 IRONWOOD
WXPR.ORG

ANNUAL MEETING

More than 200 people attended our 2024 annual meeting. Our program featured a panel discussion on public safety in Milwaukee, headlined by Mayor Cavalier Johnson, Milwaukee Police Chief Jeffrey Norman, and Milwaukee Alderman Scott Spiker. The discussion covered the decline in arrests in Milwaukee, as well as the city's reckless driving initiatives, community-oriented policing efforts, and the Office of Community Wellness and Safety.



FORUM FRIDAY

Our virtual webinar series, Forum Friday, engages public policy leaders on recently released Forum reports and timely policy issues. We hosted four Forum Friday programs in 2024 and will continue the series to augment our in-person events going forward.

Road Map: Understanding Transportation Funding in Wisconsin

President Jason Stein discussed our research on state transportation funding and how state transportation revenues could be sustainably aligned with transportation spending needs. Then Communications Director Mark Sommerhauser led the discussion with Milwaukee County Transit System Interim Director Julie Esch, former State Transportation Director Mark Gottlieb, Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association Executive Director Steve Baas, and Commercial Association of REALTORS Wisconsin President and CEO Tracy Johnson.



The Picture of Health? Considering Medicaid Expansion in Wisconsin

President Jason Stein discussed our research on potential Medicaid expansion in the state. Then Communications Director Mark Sommerhauser led the discussion with Wisconsin Medicaid Director Bill Hanna, Institute for Reforming Government Director of State Budget & Government Reform Alex Ignatowski, and Wisconsin Medical Society Chief Policy & Advocacy Officer Mark Grapentine.



FORUM FRIDAY

Wisconsin's Housing Crisis and Potential Policy Solutions

Research Director Joe Peterangelo discussed our research on housing, including this March report on how Wisconsin housing prices have risen much faster than incomes. Then President Jason Stein led the discussion with City of Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway, Washington County Executive Josh Schoemann, and Community Development Alliance Chief Alliance Executive Teig Whaley-Smith.



The ABCs of the MPS Referendum

Deputy Research Director Sara Shaw discussed our research on the April 2024 Milwaukee Public Schools referenda and its impacts on taxpayers. Then Immediate Past President Rob Henken led the discussion with Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Keith Posley, Marquette University Law School Senior Fellow in Law and Public Policy Alan Borsuk, Milwaukee Public Schools Foundation Executive Director Willie Jude II, and City Forward Collective Executive Director Colleston Morgan, Jr.



OTHER EVENTS

Big Transportation Decisions for Metro Milwaukee



Our May Viewpoint Luncheon focused on some of the Milwaukee region's biggest pending transportation decisions. Panelists included Bob Gutierrez, Wisconsin Department of Transportation Southeast Region Director; Donna Brown-Martin, Director, Milwaukee County Department of Transportation; Stephanie Hacker, Executive Director, Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission; Dale Kooyenga, President, Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce; and Kevin Muhs, City of Milwaukee Engineer.

Milwaukee's Performing Arts Sector



In June, our Policy in a Pub event focused on our recent report on the state of Milwaukee's performing arts sector. Our guests were Kevin Giglinto, the CEO of the Marcus Performing Arts Center, and Greg Wesley, who was then a senior vice president at the Medical College of Wisconsin and board member of Black Arts MKE and the Greater Milwaukee Committee. Wesley is now the president and CEO of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation.

A Closer Look at Madison School, City Referenda



In October we co-hosted an event with Downtown Madison Inc. on the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) referenda and the City of Madison operating referendum. Our guests were city of Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway, Madison Metropolitan School District Superintendent Joe Gothard, REALTORS Association of South Central Wisconsin Government Affairs Director Robert Procter, and Madison Public Schools Foundation President Melinda Heinritz.

SALUTE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

More than 460 people from across the state attended the 32nd annual Salute to Local Government on November 13th to join us in celebrating excellence in government and to hear from our keynote speaker, Milwaukee 7 Executive Director Jim Paetsch. Our awards recognized governments and school districts for innovation, partnership, cooperation, and efforts to advance racial equity, as well as individuals in the public sector for excellence and lifetime achievement. Another award category, in partnership with UW-Madison's La Follette School of Public Affairs, recognized innovative performance in state government.



**JAMES R. RYAN LIFETIME
ACHIEVEMENT AWARD (Posthumous)**

Jonathan Delagrave

*County Executive,
Racine County*



**JAMES R. RYAN LIFETIME
ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

Mark Rohloff

*City Manager,
City of Oshkosh*



**JEAN B. TYLER LEADER
OF THE FUTURE AWARD**

Isaac Rowlett

*Strategy Director,
Milwaukee County*



**DAVID G. MEISSNER AWARD FOR PUBLIC - PRIVATE
COOPERATION**

Rusk County/OakLeaf Clinics Rural Healthcare Partnership |
Rusk County and OakLeaf Clinics



**NORMAN N. GILL AWARD
FOR INDIVIDUAL EXCELLENCE**

Shakita LaGrant-McClain

*Health and Human Services Director
Milwaukee County*

SALUTE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT



DAVE STEELE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
MOBILISE

INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING

FlexRide Milwaukee | UW-Milwaukee, Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, and MobilISE



ADAM PLOTKIN
DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS
OFFICE OF THE STATE PUBLIC DEFENDER

LA FOLLETTE/GLADFELTER AWARD FOR INNOVATION IN STATE GOVERNMENT

Adam Plotkin | Office of the State Public Defender



JORGE ISLAS MARTINEZ
FOUNDER
COMMUNITY ESL PROGRAM

EFFORT TO ADVANCE RACIAL EQUITY

Community ESL Program of Whitewater | Whitewater Unified School District



ERICCA POLLACK
COLLEGE ACCESS COORDINATOR
MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

INTERGOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION

M-Cubed | Milwaukee Public Schools, Milwaukee Area Technical College, and UW-Milwaukee

STAFF



Jason Stein
President



Rob Henken
Immediate Past President



Elizabeth Cizinsky
Director of Business & Community Operations



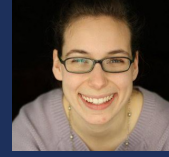
Mark Sommerhauser
Communications Director & Policy Researcher



Jeffrey Schmidt
Data & Technology Director



Joe Peterangelo
Research Director



Sara Shaw
Deputy Research Director



Ari Brown
Senior Research Associate



Ashley Fisher
Senior Research Associate



Tyler Byrnes
Senior Research Associate



Don Cramer
Researcher

Not pictured:

Alyssa Doman: *Membership & Operations Coordinator*

Catoya Roberts: *Director, Milwaukee Community Justice Council*

Erin Perkins: *Project Manager, Milwaukee Community Justice Council*

Courtney Blanford & Angie Bloechl: *Research Interns*

Report design credits: Ragusin Design; Jeff Schmidt

Photo credits: Landre Photography

FELLOWSHIPS

The Wisconsin Policy Forum awards 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.



2024-2025
Todd A. Berry Fellow
Rose Melton



2024-2025
Norman N. Gill Fellow
Vilma Fermin



2023-2024
Todd A. Berry Fellow
Ava Gagner



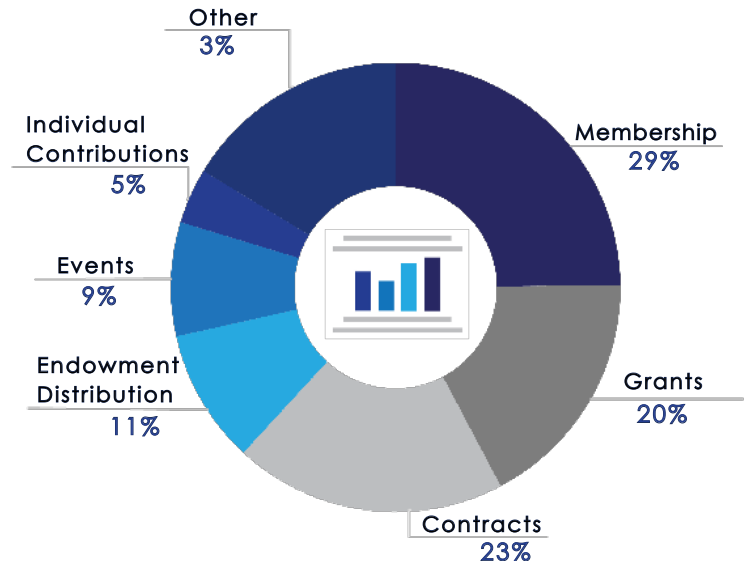
2023-2024
Norman N. Gill Fellow
Nick DeMarsh

FINANCES

The Wisconsin Policy Forum had a strong year financially in 2024. Our unaudited results show that we exceeded our ambitious budgeted amount for our largest revenue source – dues payments for existing and new members – by nearly \$15,000, in large part due to adding JPMorganChase as a Sentinel of Public Policy. While individual and foundation contributions, as well as sponsorships, were down slightly, our contract income exploded in 2024, yielding higher than anticipated revenue. This line of work will continue to provide a hedge against other potential challenges such as economic turbulence at the national level.

Overall, our unaudited results show we ran a \$88,000 operating deficit in 2024, with about \$1.61 million in unaudited operating revenue and \$1.7 million in unaudited operating expenditures. However, we did not make our budgeted 5.5% withdrawal from our reserves because of our positive cash flow. Instead, we withdrew 2%. Had we made our budgeted withdrawal, then we would have run an operating surplus of about \$87,000. Including our investment earnings of more than \$430,000 for the year, our overall unaudited financial statements show a \$212,000 surplus.

The budget is overseen by the Forum's Finance and Executive Committees, which receive frequent reports on the organization's finances. Unaudited totals show that in 2024, about 43% of the Forum's operating revenue came from grants and contracts from foundations, governments, and other entities, which support specific research projects or areas of research. About 29% of operating revenue came from membership dues, which support discretionary research projects and other activities deemed important by the staff and directors.



EVENT & REPORT SPONSORS



NETWORK AND LEARN

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 are always 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 committees: **Government Finance, Economic Development, Education, Membership & Development, Research, Madison Advisory, and Social Services.** Our policy committees meet a few times each year to review research findings and discuss potential new research topics with Forum staff.



Our 2024 Salute to Local Government had more than 460 people attend.

GOVERNMENTAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

The Forum is an active member of the Governmental Research Association (GRA), which was founded in 1914 as the national organization of entities engaged in governmental research. Deputy Research Director Sara Shaw serves on the GRA board of directors. President Jason Stein and Research Director Joe Peterangelo also served on the board. Immediate Past President Rob Henken is a former president of GRA.

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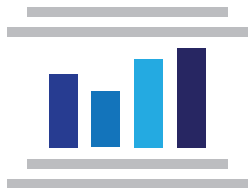
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The Chairman's Club was established in 2016 to help build financial capacity to support the Forum's core mission and enhance its communications. These generous supporters receive complimentary admission to all Forum events and are invited to private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

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