



MARATHON COUNTY EXTENSION, EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE AGENDA

Date & Time of Meeting: **Thursday, March 5, 2026, at 3:00pm**

Meeting Location: **Courthouse Assembly Room, Courthouse, 500 Forest Street, Wausau WI 54403**

Committee Members: Stacey Morache, Chair; Randy Fifrick, Vice-Chair; Wayne Hagen, Ann Lemmer, Tom Rosenberg, Rick Seefeldt, Kim Ungerer

Marathon County Mission Statement: Marathon County Government serves people by leading, coordinating, and providing county, regional, and statewide initiatives. It directly or in cooperation with other public and private partners provides services and creates opportunities that make Marathon County and the surrounding area a preferred place to live, work, visit, and do business. (Last updated: 12-20-05)

Committee Mission Statement: Provide the leadership for implementation of the Strategic Plan, monitoring outcomes, reviewing, and recommending to the County Board all policies related to educational and economic development initiatives of Marathon County.

Persons wishing to attend the meeting by phone may call into the **telephone conference beginning five (5) minutes prior to the start time indicated above using the following number:**

Phone#: 1-408-418-9388 Access Code: 146 235 4571

When you enter the telephone conference, **PLEASE PUT YOUR PHONE ON MUTE!**

The meeting will also be broadcasted on Public Access or at <https://tinyurl.com/MarathonCountyBoard>

1. **Call Meeting to Order**
2. **Pledge of Allegiance**
3. **Public Comment (15 Minutes)** (Any person who wishes to address the committee during the "Public Comment" portion of the meetings, must provide his or her name, address, and the topic he or she wishes to present to the Marathon County Clerk, or chair of the committee, no later than five minutes before the start of the meeting. All comments must be germane to a topic within the jurisdiction of the committee.)
4. **Approval of the February 5, 2026, Extension, Education and Economic Development Committee Meeting Minutes**
5. **Operational Functions Required by Statute, Ordinance, Resolution, or Policy**
 - A. Discussion and Possible Action by EEED
 - B. Discussion and Possible Action by EEED to Forward to County Board for Consideration
6. **Educational Presentations and Committee Discussion**
 - A. Finance Director update on TID meetings
 - B. MCDEVCO'S Monthly Report
 - C. Library Report
 - D. UW - Extension Monthly Report
 1. Introduction of New Extension Director
 - E. UWSP - Wausau Report
 - F. Update on WCA Conference presentations and materials related to economic development - what do we see on the horizon for the upcoming board term?
7. **Next Meeting Date & Time, Announcements and Future Agenda Items**
 - A. Committee members are asked to bring ideas for future discussion.
 - B. Next meeting: Thursday, April 2, 2026, at 3:00pm
8. **Adjournment**

*Any Person planning to attend this meeting who needs some type of special accommodation in order to participate should call the County Clerk's Office at 261.1500 or email countyclerk@marathoncounty.gov one business day before the meeting.

SIGNED _____ s/s Stacey Morache
Presiding Officer or Designee

EMAILED TO: Wausau Daily Herald, City Pages, and other Media Groups

EMAILED BY: _____

DATE & TIME: _____

NOTICE POSTED AT THE COURTHOUSE

BY: _____

DATE & TIME: _____



MARATHON COUNTY EXTENSION, EDUCATION & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE AGENDA WITH MINUTES

Date & Time of Meeting: **Thursday, February 5, 2026 at 3:00pm**

Meeting Location: **Courthouse Assembly Room, Courthouse, 500 Forest Street, Wausau WI 54403**

Stacey Morache	Present
Randy Fifrick	Webex
Wayne Hagen	Excused
Ann Lemmer	Present
Tom Rosenberg	Present
Rick Seefeldt	Present
Kim Ungerer	Present

Staff Present: Administrator Leonhard, Candace Pesch, Brian Desmond, Kurt Gibbs, Laurie Miskimins, Mallory McGivern

Others Present: Supervisor Robinson

[Meeting Recording](#)

1. **Call Meeting to Order** – Chair Stacey Morache called the meeting to order at 3:00 p.m.
2. **Pledge of Allegiance**
3. **Public Comment** - None
4. **Approval of the January 8, 2026, Extension, Education & Economic Development Committee Meeting Minutes** - Motion by Rosenberg, Second by Seefeldt to approve the minutes. Motion carried on voice vote, unanimously.
5. **Policy Issues Discussion and Potential Committee Determination**
 - A. Discussion and Possible Action by EEED - None
 - B. Discussion and Possible Action by EEED to Forward to County Board for Consideration
 1. \$5,000 Sponsorship from Marathon County to Support the 50-Year Anniversary of the Hmong Resettlement in the United States. Motion made by Seefeldt second by Lemmer to support and forward the \$5,000 Hmong sponsorship to the Human Resources, Finance and Property Committee. Motion carried on a voice vote unanimously. (0:00.01)
6. **Operational Functions Required by Statute, Ordinance, Resolution, or Policy**
7. **Educational Presentations and Committee Discussion**
 - A. Marathon county 2026 Comprehensive Plan Draft (0:14.20)
 - B. MCDEVCO's Monthly Report
 - C. UW – Extension Monthly Report (0:22.53)
8. **Next Meeting Date & Time, Announcements and Future Agenda Items**
 - A. Committee members are asked to bring ideas for future discussion.
 - B. Next meeting: Thursday, March 5, 2026, at 3:00 pm
9. **Adjournment**

Motion by Rosenberg, Second by Seefeldt to adjourn. Motion Carried on voice vote, unanimously.
Meeting adjourned at 3:33 p.m.

Minutes Prepared by Kelley Blume



MARATHON COUNTY AGENDA MEMORANDUM

TO: Marathon County Extension, Education, and Economic Development Committee
FROM: **Samantha Fenske, Finance Director**
DATE: March 5, 2026
SUBJECT: Tax Increment District (TID)/Joint Review Board (JRB) Updates

Action Requested - NONE

This memorandum is to provide an update on the JRB attended meetings and result of voting items.

Background

Wisconsin State Statutes 60.23(32), 60.85, 66.1105, and 66.1106 govern the creation and monitoring of Tax Incremental Districts (TID) in which they may utilize Tax Incremental Financing (TIF). Under 66.1105 (4m), each TID is required to have a Joint Review Board (JRB) in which there is a representative from each taxing jurisdiction within the TID and one public member. Their function is to oversee the TID.

There are currently (as of the 2025 Active Tax Incremental Districts by the Wisconsin Department of Revenue) 40 TIDs within 18 municipalities within Marathon County.

On July 22, 2025, the Marathon County Board of Supervisors passed Resolution #R36-25 to provide direction to the Marathon County representative to consider the ten standard questions set forth within the Wisconsin Department of Revenue Tax Incremental Financing Manual when voting in JRB matters.

Governing Statute/Ordinance/Policy

The governing statutes are Wisconsin State Statutes 60.23(32), 60.85, 66.1105, and 66.1106.

Discussion/Analysis

There were 13 JRB meetings in 2025. While most of the meetings were annual review of reports and performance of TIDs, two municipalities required votes for TID Plan Project Amendments.

The Village of Athens had one (1) Plan Amendment to be voted on in the 5/30/25 meeting.

- 1. TID#2 Project Plan Amendment was a subtraction to the TID territory. I voted yes. The reason for this amendment was due to a two-parcel development of which a portion (5.24 acres) resides in the TID territory. The portion is currently vacant land and is in a larger planned residential development. The developer is not receiving any TID funding. There is very minimal impact on future tax increment collections as a result of this amendment.*

The City of Wausau had three (3) Plan Amendments to be voted on in the 6/12/2025 meeting.

1. TID #3 Amendment #6 was to add \$8.5 million dollars of project costs to TID #3. I voted yes. Main conclusions were that without the completion of this TID and the proposed projects, there would be a negative impact to future potential revenues and economic growth. The projects align with the county's goals and priorities to provide additional housing and support economic growth.
2. TID #7 to share increment with TID #12 was proposed of which I voted no due to that TID #12 will occur without the funding of TID #7. TID #7 will be closing next year with a projected surplus of \$1,877,854. Of this, the county's anticipated share is \$311,348. TID #12 was created in 2017 with closure in 2037.
3. TID #8 Amendment #4 is to add \$2.5 million dollars to the project costs of which I voted no. This project lacked development that would result in economic benefit and would not create jobs, housing, or increased property value. The City Council's vote of 5/5 with the mayor breaking the vote was also taken into consideration. This TID is projected to terminate in 2031.

On December 22, 2025 the City of Wausau issued termination distribution check to Marathon County in the amount of \$257,238 as a result of the closure of TID #6.

Recommendation

This memorandum is being provided for informational purposes and does not require a recommendation.

Attachments and References

Attached are the 2025 Active Tax Incremental Districts by the Wisconsin Department of Revenue with a chart of TID counts by Municipality and a listing of past JRB meetings.

2025 Active Tax Incremental Districts (TIDs)

CoMun #	County	TVC	Municipality	TID #	Type	Base Yr.	Resolution Date	Maximum Life	Life Extended
37102	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	ATHENS	1	1D	1995	9/25/1995	9/25/2022	9/25/2032
37102	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	ATHENS	2	6	2007	2/26/2007	2/26/2027	2/26/2030
37121	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	EDGAR	1	2	2002	6/10/2002	6/10/2029	10/11/2034
37121	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	EDGAR	3	6D	2005	10/11/2004	10/11/2024	10/11/2034
37121	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	EDGAR	4	6	2016	9/15/2016	9/15/2036	
37136	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	HATLEY	1	6	2007	3/6/2007	3/6/2027	3/6/2033
37145	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	KRONENWETTER	1	5S	2005	11/3/2004	11/3/2024	11/3/2044
37145	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	KRONENWETTER	2	99	2005	11/3/2004	11/3/2029	11/3/2034
37145	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	KRONENWETTER	3	5	2005	11/3/2004	11/3/2024	11/3/2034
37145	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	KRONENWETTER	4	5D	2005	11/3/2004	11/3/2024	11/3/2034
37146	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	MAINE	1	4D	1997	9/29/1997	9/29/2020	9/29/2030
37151	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	MARATHON CITY	1	99	2002	1/3/2002	1/3/2035	
37151	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	MARATHON CITY	2	6	2016	6/20/2016	6/20/2036	
37168	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	RIB MOUNTAIN	1	6	2020	9/29/2020	9/29/2040	
37176	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	ROTHSCHILD	2	3	2013	1/28/2013	1/28/2040	
37176	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	ROTHSCHILD	3	6	2024	8/12/2024	8/12/2044	
37181	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	SPENCER	3	6	2013	9/16/2013	9/16/2033	9/16/2039
37181	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	SPENCER	4	6	2016	9/29/2016	9/29/2036	9/29/2039
37182	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	STRATFORD	3	6	2006	4/18/2006	4/18/2026	4/18/2032
37182	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	STRATFORD	4	6	2015	6/9/2015	6/9/2035	
37186	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	UNITY	1	3	1998	6/8/1998	6/8/2025	
37192	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	WESTON	1	99	1998	3/30/1998	3/30/2031	
37192	MARATHON	VILLAGE OF	WESTON	2	2	2004	5/17/2004	5/17/2031	
37201	MARATHON	CITY OF	ABBOTSFORD	5	6	2008	9/24/2008	9/24/2028	
37201	MARATHON	CITY OF	ABBOTSFORD	6	6	2016	9/21/2016	9/21/2036	
37211	MARATHON	CITY OF	COLBY	3	6	2021	1/5/2021	1/5/2042	
37211	MARATHON	CITY OF	COLBY	4	6	2022	6/7/2022	6/7/2042	
37250	MARATHON	CITY OF	MARSHFIELD	14	6	2023	9/26/2023	9/26/2043	
37251	MARATHON	CITY OF	MOSINEE	2	5	2006	10/24/2005	10/24/2025	
37251	MARATHON	CITY OF	MOSINEE	3	2	2013	9/23/2013	9/23/2040	
37281	MARATHON	CITY OF	SCHOFIELD	2	1	1994	4/4/1994	4/4/2021	4/4/2031
37281	MARATHON	CITY OF	SCHOFIELD	4	2	2017	9/12/2017	9/12/2044	
37281	MARATHON	CITY OF	SCHOFIELD	5	2	2021	7/13/2021	7/13/2048	
37291	MARATHON	CITY OF	WAUSAU	3	99	1994	9/1/1994	9/1/2031	
37291	MARATHON	CITY OF	WAUSAU	7	6	2006	1/10/2006	1/10/2026	
37291	MARATHON	CITY OF	WAUSAU	8	3	2012	4/10/2012	4/10/2039	
37291	MARATHON	CITY OF	WAUSAU	9	2	2012	9/25/2012	9/25/2039	
37291	MARATHON	CITY OF	WAUSAU	10	5	2013	9/10/2013	9/10/2033	
37291	MARATHON	CITY OF	WAUSAU	11	5	2017	7/11/2017	7/11/2037	
37291	MARATHON	CITY OF	WAUSAU	12	3	2017	7/18/2017	7/18/2044	

TID Districts by Municipality	
CITY - Total	17
ABBOTSFORD	2
COLBY	2
MARSHFIELD	1
MOSINEE	2
SCHOFIELD	3
WAUSAU	7
VILLAGE - Total	23
ATHENS	2
EDGAR	3
HATLEY	1
KRONENWETTER	4
MAINE	1
MARATHON CITY	2
RIB MOUNTAIN	1
ROTHSCHILD	2
SPENCER	2
STRATFORD	2
UNITY	1
WESTON	2

Marathon County JRB Meetings

Date	Municipality	Summary of Purpose
8/21/2024	Village of Rib Mountain	Discussion of new TID creation
8/27/2024	Village of Stratford	Review and discussion draft TID #4 Project Plan Amendment
9/9/2024	Village of Spencer	Annual review and performance of TIDS
9/11/2024	Village of Kronenwetter	Reviewed annual reports. Discussed proposed amendment of TID #2
10/2/2024	Village of Rib Mountain	Action of new TID creation (withdrawn by Village). Annual Review of TID #1
10/8/2024	Village of Kronenwetter	Resolution Consideration for TID #2 Program Plan Amendment
4/28/2025	City of Wausau	Presentation and Discussion of amendments to TIDs 3, 7, 12, and 8.
5/12/2025	Village of Athens	Reviewed TID #2 Project Plan Amendment
5/30/2025	Village of Athens	Voting on TID #2 Project Plan Amendment
6/12/2025	City of Wausau	Voting on amendments to TIDs 3,7,12, and 8. Review of reports and performance of TIDs
6/24/2025	Village of Stratford	Review of 2024 Annual Reports. Review of TID projects and anticipated developments for 2025
6/24/2025	City of Colby	Annual review and updates of TID 3 and 4
7/1/2025	City of Abbotsford	Annual review and project updates
7/31/2025	Village of Marathon City	Annual review and financials of TID 1 and 2
9/16/2025	Village of Hatley	Annual review and performance of TIDs
10/5/2025	Village of Rib Mountain	Annual review and report filling of TID #1
10/8/2025	Village of Kronenwetter	Review of Annual Reports and TID Performance
10/27/2025	Village of Spencer	Annual review and performance of TIDs
10/30/2025	Village of Weston	Annual review and performance of TIDs

MCDEVCO, Inc. – February 2026 Report

GAP & Micro FINANCING

MCDEVCO continues to work with businesses throughout Marathon County to provide GAP and Micro Financing.

POWTS REVOLVING LOAN FUND

MCDEVCO continues to process and assist with failing septic system replacements for our community.

ENTREPRENEURIAL DEVELOPMENT

2026 Programs and Educational Updates:

- **February 10 and February 17, 2026:** Public Speaking
- **April 7 & 14, 2026:** Social Media Marketing
- **May 5 & 12, 2026:** Sales and Use Tax
- ***More programs and offerings are being scheduled for Summer and Fall 2026!***

2025 Programs and Educational Updates:

- **January 28, 2025:** Public Speaking 101 hosted by MCDEVCO.
- **January 29, 2025:** Q1 Entrepreneur Information Session hosted by MCDEVCO.
- **February 4, 2025:** DC Everest Youth Entrepreneurs Tour of MCDEVCO & EEC hosted by MCDEVCO.
- **April 1 & April 8, 2025:** Social Media Marketing hosted by MCDEVCO.
- **May 13, 2025:** Q2 Entrepreneur Information Session hosted by MCDEVCO.
- **May 13 & May 20, 2025:** Sales & Use Tax Workshop hosted by MCDEVCO.
- **July 22, 2025:** UW Law & Entrepreneurship Clinic hosted by MCDEVCO.
- **August 12, 2025:** Q3 Entrepreneur Information Session hosted by MCDEVCO.
- **October 14, 2025:** Q4 Entrepreneur Information Session hosted by MCDEVCO.
- **October 17, 2025:** Women's Entrepreneurship & Leadership Summit
- **November 13, 2025:** Wausau West Entrepreneurs Field Trip to the Incubator.
- **FALL 2025:** GEARS Certificate of Entrepreneurial Excellence hosted by MCDEVCO.

Municipalities

MCDEVCO hosts quarterly municipality meetings.

Wausau Business Incubator (WBI) Management

February YTD Occupancy: 89.62%

WBI and MCDEVCO consultation with UW-Platteville regarding recommendations to get their incubator kitchen back up and running.

Respectfully submitted for:

Kim Weber, Executive Director – MCDEVCO

YQ

PUBLIC SPEAKING 101

Perfect your business pitch in this two-day workshop with MCDEVCO! Get hands on practice and learn tips and tricks on how to become a better public speaker using acting techniques.

DATE
TUESDAYS, FEBRUARY 10 & 17, 2026

TIME
6:00 PM - 8:00 PM

REGISTER NOW

www.mcdevco.org
715.298.0084



INSTRUCTOR
MELANIE XIONG



SOCIAL MEDIA SUCCESS

Not getting the results you want on social media? Look no further! Find out exactly what works right now on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and how you can use them to drive tangible leads.

DATE
TUESDAYS, APRIL 7 & 14, 2026

TIME
6:00 PM - 8:00 PM

REGISTER NOW

www.mcdevco.org
715.298.0084



INSTRUCTOR
BRYSON BERNADE



SALES & USE TAX WORKSHOP

Sales tax is complex and can be costly... tackle the basics with a former auditor! Learn more about WI Sales & Use Tax, such as when to register, what is taxable, exemptions, and audit tips.

DATE
TUESDAYS, MAY 5 & 12, 2026

TIME
6:00 PM - 8:00 PM

REGISTER NOW

www.mcdevco.org
715.298.0084



INSTRUCTOR
HOLLY HOFFMAN





*We teach, learn, lead, and serve,
connecting people with the University of Wisconsin, and engaging with
them in transforming lives and communities.*

4-H – Positive Youth Development

Holly Luerssen, 4-H Program Educator

- A pen pal project for youth in grades 5K - 2 where young people practice reading and writing skills in order to create and build new relationships across 8 counties in central Wisconsin.
 - Pen pal projects have a long history of building relationships between people from areas different from their own. A few counties initiated this effort during COVID in 2020 and felt like it would be a beneficial project to expand. This eight county pen pal project is based on the Flat Stanley Project, an international literacy and communications pen pal activity based on the book Flat Stanley by Jeff Brown. We introduced youth to the story during a story read-a-long via Zoom. All participants receive a journal and a Flat Stanley/Stella template to complete. We then had a 2nd zoom to continue reading the story and checking in with families that they received their packets. After they complete a few pages in the journal and color their Flat Stanley/Stella, they then mail the journal and character through USPS to another participant. The recipient will share adventures with Flat Stanley/Stella and journal about their adventures. At the end, each journal and Flat Stanley/Stella are returned to their creators. The project will end with a wrap up zoom where more of the Flat Stanley story is read and participants share some of the adventures they went on with Stanley or Stella. Over 60 young people registered for the pen pal project. There was great excitement on the opening zooms to get started. Through this effort, youth build communication, planning, and record keeping skills, along with engaging with others and learning about a new place.
- An in-person, overnight camp for youth in grades 6-12 during which they practiced leadership and team building skills while creating a social network. Through this camp, youth increased engagement with 4-H, reaching beyond the club.
- An orientation for youth in grades 9-12, attending the Ignite by 4-H conference and Citizen Washington Focus, where participants learned more about the experience they will be attending in March. Through this program, youth and parents were able to ask questions, familiarize themselves with the details of the trip, and begin forming relationships with other youth and adults attending the conference.
 - Many youth across the state have not attended a national 4-H experience before and this can cause a lot of anxiety for both participants and parents. There are many details that go into these educational experiences and an orientation over Zoom is a great way to address that need. Educators leading this



experience created a presentation to deliver crucial details to participants and families, allowing them to become more comfortable with the travel that will be occurring. Through direct delivery of content and asking youth to interact with one another through breakout rooms, participants are able to start to build relationships with fellow travelers and adults. Youth were able to interact, ask questions, and gain knowledge of the upcoming trip. This creates an opportunity to ease any nervousness about travel and let youth know what to expect.

Agriculture

Heather Schlessner, Dairy Agent

Matt Lippert, Regional Dairy Educator

Melissa Ohlrich, Regional Crops & Soils Educator

- In February 2026, an in-person Save a Calf, Save a Cow dairy workshop with Spanish interpretation provided dairy producers and workers with practical skills in calving preparation, obstetric techniques, and newborn calf care to strengthen caretaker confidence and support herd health and farm economic viability.
 - Area 7 livestock and dairy educators received requests for obstetric training, as farms invest heavily in reproductive programs and rely on proper cow nutrition, health, and newborn calf care to ensure successful calving, healthy calves, and long-term herd productivity. Educators Stuttgart, Schlessner and Sterry upgraded their skills for teaching obstetrics and calf care topics by attending the University of Nebraska Beef Extension 2025 Calving College Producer Education Series. Schlessner's Extension office purchased a bovine calving model to use in this series. Schlessner and Stuttgart have previously taught obstetrics training for beef and dairy producers. As a bovine veterinarian, Stuttgart has lifelong experience in obstetrics. McCarville will provide instruction in dairy transition cow nutrition. UW Madison OAIC provided Spanish translation of the fliers, the bilingual registration form and will provide interpreters at the workshop. 15 individuals, including 5 Hispanic dairy workers attended. With a 93% response rate for both Dairy Transition Cow Nutrition and Newborn Calf Care and Colostrum Management sessions, the weighted average understanding increased from 2.8 before the session to 3.5 after, reflecting a consistent +0.7-point gain on the 5-point Likert scale. This smaller increase is attributed to the participants rating their understanding high before the sessions (3.8 and 3.5 respectfully). When asked what they found most useful, 85.7% cited the obstetric model practice and 42.9% the calving kit demonstration. One respondent wrote that they learned a lot from the colostrum testing demonstration. Additional evaluation comments include 'learned more about dry cow nutrition; learned lots about delivery of calves; proper way to use a calf jack; pulling a calf/chaining them; learning how to feel for a calf and orientation of it in the cow; I learned more dry cow managements; colostrum quality and long term effects; more confidence in calving assistance.' Respondents also listed topics they would like to see at future calving workshops, one wrote, 'make classes longer and even more extensive.'
- Planning April 2026 in-person Save a Calf Save A Cow Workshops for dairy and dairy workers (with Spanish interpretation) and beef producers. The goal is to provide information and techniques to boost cattle



caretakers' confidence in preparing the cow for calving, obstetric techniques and newborn calf care so that their health and reproductive programs maintain their farm's economic viability.

- Local area livestock and dairy educators received requests for obstetric trainings. Time and money are heavily invested in the farm's reproductive program with the goal of obtaining a live calf from every breeding. The nutritional and health care of the pregnant animal contributes to her potential for successful gestation and calving, a healthy calf and future rebreeding. Newborn calf care provides the opportunity for calves to reach their full genetic potential as productive individuals for years to come. In-person workshops are planned for April in Medford and Chippewa Falls. Educators Stuttgart, Schlessler and Sterry upgraded their skills for teaching obstetrics and calf care topics by attending the University of Nebraska Beef extension 2025 Calving College Producer Education Series. Schlessler's Extension office purchased a bovine calving model to use in this series. Schlessler and Stuttgart have previously taught obstetrics training for beef and dairy producers. As a bovine veterinarian, Stuttgart has lifelong experience in obstetrics. Lippert will provide instruction in dairy transition cow nutrition. UW Madison OAIC provided Spanish translation of the fliers, the bilingual registration form and will provide interpreters at the workshops. These will be reported from evaluation data after the workshops.
- A series of presentations at educational meetings for northeastern & eastern Wisconsin farmers and crop consultants, where participants learned about nitrogen credits from leguminous cover crops to enhance their understanding of how including legume cover crops can result in the ability for reducing synthetic nitrogen fertilizer rates, thereby reducing negative impacts to farm profitability and environmental degradation.
 - Wisconsin farmers and crop consultants recognize the value of implementing cover crops to reduce soil erosion and nutrient runoff, but less information is available that provides insight as to how much nitrogen legume cover crop species can provide to subsequent year corn when planted after a small grain crop. This project team initiated an on-farm research project in collaboration with 5 Wisconsin farmers in Northeastern / Eastern Wisconsin in 2024-2025. The study allowed for direct determination of optimal corn nitrogen fertilizer application rates when corn followed A) no cover crop or B) a berseem clover (legume) cover crop. Doing so resulted in data that informs the primary "need" of providing farmers with information regarding how much nitrogen legume cover crops can provide to following year corn. In addition to the research, an emphasis on results-outreach was initiated during the winter (2026) meeting season where project results were shared throughout the region. The results of the project suggest that berseem clover cover crops (1 of many legume species available to WI farmers) planted after small grains and ahead of corn (grain) can provide nitrogen credits that range from 0 to 100 pounds of N per acre. In other words, depending on how much cover crop biomass that is accumulated, farmers could reduce their synthetic N fertilizer application rates by 0 to 100 lbs/ac (average of 32 lbs / ac). Sharing these results through outreach efforts provides farmers and crop consultants with the necessary data and information they need to make informed decisions on their farms. The importance of these results, assuming farmers implement similar practices to those studied in this project, is highlighted in each of farm-economics and agronomics in addition to environmental outcomes. Reducing the reliance on synthetic N fertilizer may save farmers



money in the short-term while also reducing the amount of N that is susceptible to loss to our ground water resources; benefitting those far beyond the confines of the farm.

- Planning and preparation for a field day focused on the use of Automatic Milking Systems (AMS) for dairy producers and ag professionals where participants will increase their AMS related knowledge through facility tours, educational sessions, and peer-to-peer learning. The goal of this effort is to help farmers make informed, strategic, and economically viable decisions regarding AMS adoption and use.
 - The adoption of automatic milking systems (AMS) has steadily increased since their introduction. Successful AMS adoption and use requires careful planning and management by farmers regarding all aspects of their farming operation and lifestyle. Currently there is a lack of publicly available, non-commercial educational opportunities for farmers and ag professionals to learn about the considerations of AMS adoption and use. To address this current gap, a team of Extension professionals are developing and organizing a field day focused on AMS adoption and use. Participants will learn about AMS adoption and use through facility tours, educational sessions, and peer-to-peer learning. The goal of this effort is to help farmers make informed, strategic, and economically viable decisions regarding AMS adoption and use. An AMS focused field day will be held that includes farm tours, educational sessions, and peer-to-peer learning opportunities.
- Planning for a four-session, 2026 Focus on Forage webinar series for livestock producers, forage growers and agriculture consultants. The goal of the series is to provide timely forage management guidance to improve forage quality and meet farm productivity goals.
 - Dairy and livestock producers require high-quality forages to meet the animal production goals on their farms. Using a quality forage base reduces feed inputs and leads to improved animal health, milk production and growth. There are many opportunities for forage growers to increase forage dry matter production and quality while optimizing input costs, and this series aims to provide research based solutions to these producers. The Focus on Forage planning team identified topics and speakers that address the key management challenges and opportunities that exist for forage growers. Ongoing planning will result in four scheduled webinars in February 2026 that will each address a specific topic area related to forage production.

Horticulture

Janell Wehr, Horticulture Educator

Gaonou Thao, Hmong Farmer Outreach Specialist

- Planning for a bilingual agricultural conference for Hmong farmers in collaboration with local agencies and educators. The goal is to provide education on sustainable farming, business development, and pest management, so that participants can improve farm profitability, adopt resilient practices, and strengthen community connections.



- Hmong farmers in Wisconsin face significant barriers to accessing agricultural education and resources due to language differences, cultural considerations, and limited outreach. These challenges restrict opportunities for adopting sustainable practices, improving farm business management, and connecting with technical assistance programs. To address barriers faced by Hmong farmers in accessing agricultural education, a bilingual agricultural conference is being developed. The event will feature concurrent tracks on farm business management and production practices, including sessions on sustainable farming, integrated pest management, and financial planning. Each session will incorporate interpretation services, printed materials in Hmong and English, and interactive activities to ensure accessibility and engagement. The conference will also include resource tables and roundtable discussions to connect participants with grants, technical assistance, and financial tools. This initiative is expected to result in increased access to culturally relevant agricultural education for Hmong farmers through a bilingual conference format. Anticipated short-term outcomes include improved knowledge of sustainable farming practices, integrated pest management, and farm business strategies, as well as greater awareness of available grants and technical assistance. Medium-term impacts are expected to include adoption of improved agricultural practices, stronger engagement with Extension and partner agencies, and enhanced farm profitability. Long-term outcomes aim to strengthen economic resilience among Hmong farmers, build community networks, and increase representation in regional agricultural initiatives. These outcomes address broader societal issues of equity in education and resource access, contributing to sustainable local food systems and economic stability.
- A plant propagation program in partnership with Marathon County 4-H for elementary school students, where youth explored transformative learning by propagating African violets. This effort is designed to support science literacy in youth.
- A program for Marshfield area residents where participants learned the physical, biological, and chemical characteristics of soil, how nutrients affect plant growth, and techniques for successful direct sowing and planting transplants. Through this effort, participants improved their understanding of how sustainable gardening practices positively impact their landscapes.
 - As a result of this program, all participants shared that they understood how soil texture improved the soil, how nutrients help plants grow, and how to use a seed packet to find planting information. When asked what they will do differently in the future, participants shared getting their soil tested in the spring and using more compost.



Natural Resources

Kris Tiles, NRI Program Manager

Anna James, Regional Natural Resources Educator

Jen McNelly, Regional Natural Resources Groundwater Educator

- A monthly email newsletter for woodland owners and stewards in Wisconsin. The newsletter features phenology tidbits, educational content, practical tips, and actionable resources for all aspects of woodland stewardship, along with listings of upcoming Extension Forestry events. Through this effort, we empower readers to connect more deeply with their land and make informed decisions to steward their woods in an environmentally and economically sustainable way.
 - Wisconsin is home to an estimated 426,000 family woodland ownerships, covering 57% of the wooded land in the state (Butler et al., 2021; Wisconsin DNR, 2020). Sustainable stewardship of these forests is crucial to support the economic viability of the state's \$42 billion forest products industry; landowners' opportunities for recreation, supplemental income, and other connections to the land; and ecosystem services such as wildlife habitat, clean water, clean air, and carbon storage (Wisconsin DNR, 2023). Extension's outreach events and communications efforts play a key role in helping woodland owners steward their woods, especially since most family woodland owners in the state do not have formal management plans (Butler et al., 2021). Participants in our events and classes often express a desire to stay connected with future events and resources from Extension Forestry. We created an email newsletter to stay connected with past attendees of our events and help them continue to deepen their engagement with their woodland. Our newsletter also provides an entry point to woodland stewardship for folks who have not yet attended one of our events. Digital outreach like this allows us to reach people who live anywhere in Wisconsin, including both those who live on their rural woodland property as well as those who live in urban areas and own land elsewhere. January 2026 newsletter featured: - how mammals handle Wisconsin winters - how to identify trees in the winter Typically, more than half of the attendees of our events find out about our events through our emails. Readers of the newsletter have access to timely resources that help them implement stewardship projects on their land and take steps toward creating healthy and resilient woodlands that benefit ecosystems, human health, and the economy.
- Social media (Facebook and Instagram) outreach for Wisconsin woodland owners and stewards, where we share educational tidbits about forestry-related topics and information about upcoming forestry-related events so that woodland owners learn more about their woodlands and engage with our programming and resources. By engaging with our social media content, woodland owners build their sense of connection to their land and make informed decisions to steward their woods in an environmentally and economically sustainable way.
 - In the modern information ecosystem, social media platforms are an important way to reach geographically dispersed audiences. 70% of U.S. adults use Facebook, including 74% of rural residents, 70% of those ages 50-64, and 59% of those ages 65+. Facebook is also home to various



"groups" for Wisconsin maple syrup producers and other woodland stewards. Therefore, Facebook is a promising venue to reach Wisconsin woodland owners. At the same time, woodland owners are an aging demographic, and the future of Wisconsin's privately owned forests depends on getting younger generations to become more engaged in woodland stewardship and ownership. 50% of U.S. adults use Instagram, including 76% of those ages 18-29 and 66% of those ages 30-49. Therefore, Instagram is a promising venue to reach potential future Wisconsin woodland owners. Additionally, social media provides a way for landowners who have attended our events to stay engaged with our resources on woodland stewardship throughout the year. UW-Madison Extension Forestry maintains active accounts on Facebook and Instagram. We typically post at least twice per week on both platforms and are working to grow our audience in the long term. We use both organic (unpaid) posts and paid advertisements to reach Wisconsin woodland owners. Number of posts by category (the same content shared on both Facebook and Instagram is counted as one post): - invasive species: 1 - climate variability: 0 - wetlands: 0 - economic opportunities: 0 - forest stewardship: 0 - wildlife: 3 - food production/safety/security: 1 - intergenerational land transfer: 0 Note that some posts do not fit into one of the above categories. Our social media efforts contribute to our broader mission of getting Wisconsin woodland owners involved in sustainable management of their woodlands by exposing them to forestry topics when they otherwise might not be thinking about their woods (scrolling through social media) and increasing attendance at our events. Post-event surveys indicate that many people who attend our events learn about them through social media.

- A workgroup for Marathon County staff and water resource professionals to review and discuss the existing Marathon County Wellhead Protection Ordinance. The workgroup will continue to meet monthly to discuss revisions to the ordinance and mapping until the ordinance is updated.
 - Wellhead protection is a preventative program to protect public water supply systems by trying to prevent contaminants from entering those systems. A wellhead protection ordinance is a regulatory tool that can be used by municipalities to limit land uses that pose a potential contamination risk in the recharge zone of the public water supplies. Marathon County has had a wellhead protection ordinance that covers recharge zones that lie outside of municipal boundaries but that are in the County's zoning jurisdiction. However, maps outlining where the boundaries of the recharge zones lie, were never created and the zoning ordinance has never been implemented. Marathon County has expressed a desire to update the ordinance and create mapped boundaries for the recharge zones. A workgroup of Marathon County staff from various departments and water professionals from UW-Madison Division of Extension, DNR, and Wisconsin Rural Water Association were convened in January to begin discussions about Marathon County's wellhead protection ordinance. Discussion centered around what other Counties had done with their ordinances, questions about how mapping could be undertaken, and what municipalities in the County already had in place. The workgroup will work over the upcoming year on drafting new maps outlining the proposed wellhead protection districts and updated text for the ordinance that will protect public water supplies in the County. The final product will be an updated wellhead protection ordinance.



Additional Extension Outreach Programming Occurring in Marathon County

- A 50 minute workshop on using empathy mapping to create effective fundraising appeals for community nonprofits who attended the Central Wisconsin Nonprofit Community Forum.
 - Nationally, nonprofits list “rising operations costs” and “inadequate finances” as the top two challenges. Since the beginning of 2025, these trends have accelerated, driven primarily by funding uncertainty from traditionally reliable sources, including federal grants. A team of Extension Organizational and Leadership Development educators has developed a curriculum to provide Wisconsin Nonprofits with the skills and tools to assess, refine, and create fund development strategies necessary to fulfill their organizational mission. The workshop was attended by 32 nonprofit leaders in Central Wisconsin who serve community members in Adams, Clark, Lincoln, Marathon, Portage, Taylor, Waushara, and Waupaca counties. Learners were asked to rate the workshop on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being the lowest level of agreement and 5 being the highest, across three criteria: knowledge gained, usefulness to their organization, and the quality of the facilitation. The workshop was rated highly across all criteria: 4 out of 5 for knowledge gained (n=19), 4.2 out of 5 for usefulness (n=19), and 4.5 out of 5 on the quality of facilitation (n=19). Learners were also given the opportunity to provide feedback on what they found to be most useful and how that knowledge would be applied. The responses were primarily about how better understanding how a donor might feel will empower them as a nonprofit leader to build stronger, more authentic relationships with donors, which in turn will make it easier to make fundraising appeals.
- Continued planning efforts for the Central Wisconsin Housing Summit, a regional convening designed to bring together developers, municipal leaders, and housing practitioners. The event will highlight best practices, resources, and collaborative strategies to advance local housing solutions that address workforce needs and support long-term community vitality. This event is designed to elevate the builder and developer perspective and address real challenges in today’s housing landscape. The goal is to accelerate cross-sector collaboration that leads to more housing development in Central Wisconsin.
 - Affordable housing in rural regions is significantly less and often hard to generate. Working with Extension colleagues across the state on an Innovation Grant to target different regional areas in Wisconsin that face this housing crisis was a must. As part of a collaborative effort to engage community leaders and residents from several counties in the central Wisconsin region, the planning and facilitation of a regional rural housing summit is in the early stages of development. This series of regional workshops is intended to build local capacity, facilitate regional partnerships, and strengthen local connections to state and federal agencies. Presenters will review data, strategies and case studies that provide a road map for rural communities to increase housing availability and access. Modeled on the EDA University Center’s successful regional economic summit program, each event will include formal presentations, panel discussions, networking opportunities, and resource



Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
MARATHON COUNTY

February 2026

takeaways. Planned outcomes: Upon completion, there will be updated housing and resource data, stronger connections between regional partners and state agencies, increased rural access to state and federal dollars to support housing access, affordability, and availability, an increase in the number of affordable, accessible housing units in rural areas, and greater cooperation across counties and within regions as they pursue innovative housing solutions. At the end of the funding period, we will measure success in terms of the number of communities that have received education, the extent to which their capacity to address housing has grown, and the degree to which each is actively pursuing housing solutions. Success will be measured by the impacts outlined above. Since housing is a cross-institutional challenge, we expect to involve Extension colleagues from all institutes to participate in these workshops. We will share progress in a series of Lunch-n-Learn webinars, at All Colleague meetings, and in Area meetings as opportunities arise.



Upcoming Programs

- **4-H Programming** – Information at <https://marathon.extension.wisc.edu/4h/>
- **Horticultural Programs** – Information at <https://marathon.extension.wisc.edu/horticulture/programs/>
- **Agricultural Programs** – Information at <https://marathon.extension.wisc.edu/agriculture/>
- **Hmong Farmers/Growers Gathering** – Learn more and register:
<https://marathon.extension.wisc.edu/horticulture/programs-and-events/hmong-farmers-growers-gathering-2/>
 - Saturday, March 14, 8:00–4:30, Lake View Conference Center
- **Central Wisconsin Housing Summit** – Learn more and register:
<https://www.simpletix.com/e/2026-central-wisconsin-housing-summit-tickets-240877>
 - Wednesday, April 15, 8:00 – 4:00, Dreyfus University Center
- **Understanding AI: A Forum for Local Governments** – Learn more and receive a registration notification:
extension.wisc.edu/aiforums
 - Thursday, March 5th 8:00 – 3:30, Wisconsin Dells at the Kalahari Resort
 - Tuesday, March 17th 8:00 – 3:30, Oshkosh at the Marriott Waterfront Hotel & Convention Center
 - Wednesday, March 18th 8:00 – 3:30, Eau Claire at the Lismore Hotel
 - Thursday, March 26th 8:00 – 3:30, Lac du Flambeau at the Lake of the Torches Resort

Hmong Farmers/Growers Gathering

March 14, 8AM-4:30PM
Lake View Conference Center, Wausau

The mission of the Hmong farmers gathering is to support and empower Hmong-speaking farmers with practical knowledge, resources, and community connections that enhance agricultural productivity, sustainability, and economic opportunity.





Wausau UW-Stevens Point

Report to the Extension, Education, and Economic Development Committee February, 2026

1. **Fall 2026 Recruitment:** Fall 2026 recruitment is well underway. Applications and admissions are up from last year. Our office of Financial Aid and Scholarships will notify incoming students of their financial aid package in the coming weeks.
2. **Admitted Student Day:** Our admitted students will be joining us for a fun morning at NTC on March 13th. Admitted students will learn about next steps, hear more about how our partnership with NTC will benefit them, register for orientation and academic advising appointments, take a photo for their student ID, get a campus tour, and have an opportunity to take the UW math placement test.
3. **Other events for prospective students:**
 - a. **Weekly visits:** We offer an admissions presentation Thursdays afternoons at 2:00 pm.
 - b. **Preview:** Our spring Preview event will be April 17th. Prospective students and their families are invited to Preview to for an admissions presentation and student panel.
 - i. For all prospective student events: Register at <https://apply.uwsp.edu/portal/all-visits-wausau>
4. **Continuing Education:** UWSP's Continuing Education department has a wide range of offerings on all three UWSP campuses.
 - a. The Central Wisconsin Musicians next concert will be on May 7th, at 7:00 pm in the Veniga Theater.
 - b. The Central Wisconsin Voices Spring concert will be May 16th at 3:00 pm in the Veniga Theater.
 - c. You can see all CE offerings on their website:
<https://www3.uwsp.edu/conted/Pages/Professional-Development.aspx>
5. **Degree Programs Offered** – Below is a list of the degree programs we currently offer on the Wausau campus.
 - a. Associate Degrees
Associate of Arts and Sciences Degree
Human Services

Leadership and Project Mgt
Pre-Engineering

- b. Bachelors programs
 - B.S. in Business Administration
 - B.S. in Nursing (full degree and completion options available)
 - B.S. in Organizational Leadership
 - B.S. in Multidisciplinary Studies
 - B.S. in Multidisciplinary Studies—Technology Management Emphasis Engineering (UW-Platteville Partnership)

- c. Master's Degrees
 - Masters of Business Administration in Applied Leadership and Decision-Making Physician Assistant Program (UW-Madison Partnership)

Submitted by Miranda Gentry-Siegel, Wausau Campus Executive

Wisconsin Counties Association - Magazine

The March magazine will be available on the above site in the near future

- <https://www.wicounties.org/publications/>

WCA Legislative Conference Materials are not available at this time

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2026

- 8:00 a.m. **Registration & Continental Breakfast**
- 9:00 a.m. **Welcome & Pledge of Allegiance**
Lance Pliml, Chair, WCA Board of Directors
- 9:05 a.m. **Opening Remarks**
Mark D. O'Connell, President & CEO, Wisconsin Counties Association
- 9:10 a.m. **Evers' Administration**
Moderator: Mark D. O'Connell, President & CEO, Wisconsin Counties Association
- 9:30 a.m. **Washington Update**
Matthew D. Chase, CEO & Executive Director, National Association of Counties
Mark D. O'Connell, President & CEO, Wisconsin Counties Association
- 10:15 a.m. **Break**
- 10:30 a.m. **Transportation Delivers: A Sustainable Funding Discussion**
Debby Jackson, Executive Director, Transportation Development Association
Robb Kahl, Executive Director, Construction Business Group
Moderator: Collin Driscoll, WCA Government Affairs Associate
- 11:00 a.m. **Legislative Update**
WCA Government Affairs Team
- 12:00 p.m. **Lunch**
- 12:45 p.m. **Forward Analytics**
Kevin Dospoy, Director, Forward Analytics
Jacob Anderson, Research Analyst, Forward Analytics
Moderator: Michael Lamont, Vice President of Programs & Services, Wisconsin Counties Association
- 1:15 p.m. **Leadership Staff Roundtable**
Maggie Gau, Chief of Staff, Governor Tony Evers
Jenny Toftness, Chief of Staff, Speaker Robin Vos
Ashley Czaja, Chief of Staff, Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu
Moderator: Marcie Rainbolt, WCA Government Affairs
- 2:00 p.m. **Break**
- 2:15 p.m. **Keynote Address**
Mark D. O'Connell, President & CEO, Wisconsin Counties Association
- 3:00 p.m. **Legal Update**
Andy Phillips, Attolles Law, s.c.
- 3:45 p.m. **Conclude**
- 5:00-7:00 p.m. **Reception Honoring County Government**

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2026

- 7:30 a.m. **Hot Breakfast Buffet**
- 8:30 a.m. **Call to Order & Welcome**
Mark D. O'Connell, President & CEO, Wisconsin Counties Association
- 8:35 a.m. **Legislative Leadership Roundtable**
Devin LeMahieu, Senate Majority Leader
Dianne Hesselbein, Senate Minority Leader
Robin Vos, Assembly Speaker
Greta Neubauer, Assembly Minority Leader
Moderator: Kyle Christianson, Partner at Wimmer & Company
- 9:35 a.m. **Break**
- 9:50 a.m. **Ask The Attorney**
Andy Phillips, Attolles Law, s.c.
- 10:50 a.m. **Keynote Steve Ackerman, Badger Talks**
The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald: The Ship, the Storm, and the Song
We explore the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald from perspectives of the weather, the ship and the song by Gordon Lightfoot.
- 11:50 a.m. **Conclude with Giveaways**
Grab a boxed lunch

Affordability: More than Wages vs. Prices

Kevin Dospoy, Director and Jacob Anderson, Research Analyst

Few economic terms are used more frequently today than “affordability.” Whether in news headlines or policy discussions, the term is routinely cited. Public discourse on the topic usually centers around the money a typical household has to spend and the price of the goods and services purchased by that household.

Over the past 25 years, the amount earned by a typical household has increased substantially. At the same time, a broad set of goods and services have increased in price by a similar amount.

Economists typically measure the growth in household earnings by measuring the change in median household income, which includes salaries, wages, Social Security, and some government transfers. In 2000, the median household income in Wisconsin was \$45,090 per year. By 2024, this figure grew by 83% to \$82,560. Preliminary estimates for 2025 show this figure may have grown by 90% since 2000.

The change in the price of various goods is measured by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, most commonly reported as the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Since 2000, the cost of the standard basket of goods and services measured by the CPI has increased by almost 87%, meaning the products measured were almost 1.9 times more expensive in 2025 compared to 2000. While the CPI reflects average prices and individual experiences may vary, the figure is the most well-rounded and thorough measure of price changes.

Because these two measures have increased by virtually the same amount since 2000, the usual conclusion would be that the purchasing power of the typical household has changed little during this period. If that is the case, why is “affordability” one of the most frequently cited economic concerns in public discourse?

A common interpretation of the data assumes price changes affect all parts of a household budget evenly

and that households can easily adapt their budgets as prices change. In reality, much of a typical household’s budget is tied up in goods and services that are difficult to reduce, substitute, or eliminate, such as housing, transportation, health care, and education.

Affordability, in this context, is not simply a question of wages keeping up with, or even outpacing inflation. Instead, it is the ability of a household to purchase goods and services without compromising the ability to meet other essential needs.

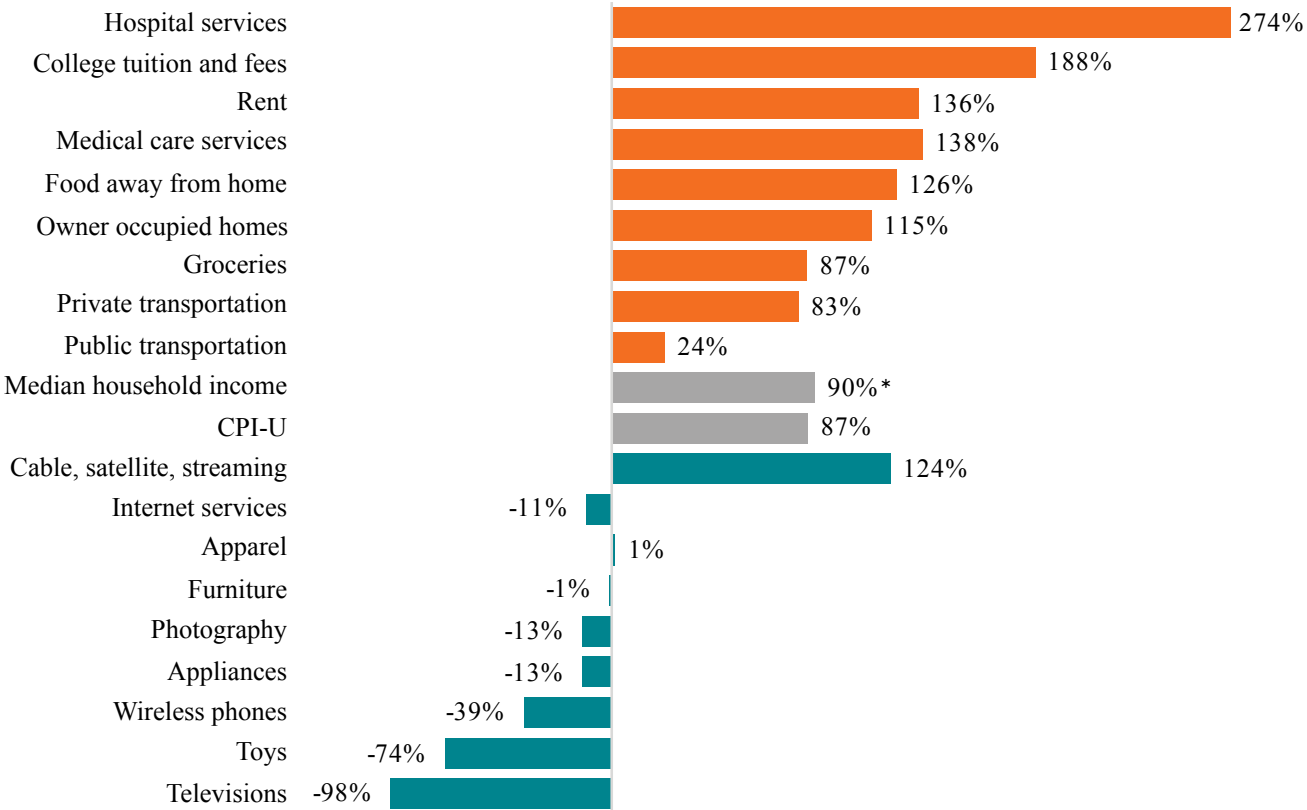
When something is unaffordable, it reflects more than just an increase in price relative to income. In practice, unaffordability forces households to spend down their savings, take on debt, reduce spending in other areas, or forgo goods and services altogether.

If affordability depends on whether households can absorb higher essential costs, then average price growth is an incomplete measure. What matters is not just the overall growth in prices, but which categories are driving those increases and the ability of household spending to adapt to such changes. As such, the remainder of this Spotlight examines the costs of essential goods and services separately from those that may be considered discretionary.

ESSENTIAL COSTS

“Essential” goods and services are products without which an individual could not fully participate in the job market or society in general. Put another way, these goods and services are difficult to substitute and they account for an unavoidable share of household budgets. They are also less predictable and less deferrable. These can include hospital services, medical care, food, housing, college tuition, and transportation. Prices for most essential goods and services outpaced the 87% growth in inflation and increased more than the 90% growth in median household income.

Figure 1: Prices of Essential Goods and Services Outpace Discretionary
 Increase in prices of Essentials (Orange), Discretionary/Nonessential (Teal) CPI-U and Median WI Household Income (Grey), 2000-2025



*2025 data based on preliminary estimates

Since 2000, medical care services have increased by over 138%. This is the BLS category that measures prices paid for health care services, including doctor visits and nursing homes. Hospital services, which includes inpatient and outpatient care, increased by 274% during this time period. These figures do not necessarily reflect out-of-pocket costs, but even costs paid by insurers filter down to consumers.

Grocery prices have increased by 87%, which is around the same rate as inflation over this period. An important note about “food at home” as measured by BLS is that the figure does not reflect the true magnitude of substitution (for example, switching to a store brand product that is cheaper). More significantly, prices for “food away from home,” which measures, in part, restaurants and food delivery services, increased by almost 126% from 2000 through 2025. One contributing factor can be food producers and manufacturers utilizing economies of scale that may keep grocery prices relatively low. Restaurants and food delivery service prices are driven in large part by the increasing cost of labor.

Housing costs have risen as well. Prices for owner occupied homes have increased by 115% while the price of rent has increased an average of nearly 136%. These prices are relatively inflexible, meaning that locked-in mortgages reduce the impact to existing homeowners, but new buyers and renters may bear the brunt of such price increases.

College tuition and fees, a consistent cause of financial strain for younger Wisconsinites, have increased an average of 188% since 2000. This increase represents the cost of tuition and fees but excludes financial aids, scholarships, and room and board.

Transportation expenses can be measured in various ways. Private transportation, which measures the cost of owning a new or used car, motor fuel, and maintenance, has increased by 83% since 2000. Public transportation measures the prices of taxis, subways, buses, air travel, etc. These costs have risen by just 24% during the same time period.

As essential costs rise faster than median household income, they consume more of household budgets and leave less room for additional expenses. Since

these essential costs cannot easily be substituted, reduced, or eliminated, they consume the first part of a household budget. The remainder is what is left for discretionary spending.

A common critique of any discussion surrounding affordability is that households spend too much on discretionary goods. To evaluate this claim, the next section examines the change in the cost of several discretionary goods and services.

DISCRETIONARY SPENDING

Discretionary goods and services are those that can more easily be reduced, substituted, or eliminated without causing members of a household to lose access to basic necessities. Such goods can include televisions, cellphone services, computer software and video games, toys, and household appliances and furnishings.

There are various goods that at one point could have been considered discretionary, but now may be essential. For example, in 2026 mobile phones can certainly be considered essential. Yet, they are included here because more expensive phones can be substituted for much less expensive models. Another example is transportation. A new car can be significantly more expensive than a used car. While in many cases, a vehicle is a necessary and essential good, the wide difference in price between a new and used car allows the good to be discussed alongside other forms of discretionary spending.

Electronic goods decreased in overall prices significantly over the past 25 years. Televisions declined by 98% in price after accounting for quality improvements. The price of wireless phones declined by

39%. Prices for toys and appliances dropped by 74% and 13% respectively. Such a substantial decrease in prices reflects more manufacturers and producers entering the market, increasing competition for better and more refined products, and innovations in the electronics industry. On the other hand, cable, satellite, and live streaming services have increased by 124% during the same time period.

These price changes are illustrated in figure 1. The divergence between essential and discretionary goods is evident. Taken together, these changes shed some light on why households feel that their purchasing power has declined. Discretionary goods are cheaper as households are earning more money than previously. But the savings in discretionary spending are often insufficient to offset increases in essential goods and services such as healthcare and hospital services.

Households can try to adapt their budgets to accommodate the increased cost of essential goods by reducing spending in nonessential categories, but discretionary goods cannot be reduced or eliminated entirely. Affordability is not about whether households can still buy televisions and smartphones. It's more about what is left after essential goods and services consume an ever-increasing portion of household budgets.

Comparing median household income to the CPI on the surface shows little change in affordability over the past 25 years. On the other hand, digging deeper and comparing median household income to the price changes of essential and discretionary goods and services shows that household budgets have changed substantially.