



**Office of the County Executive**  
*Josh Schoemann, County Executive*

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**2023 State of the County Address**  
**September 12, 2023 at Delta Defense, West Bend**

Thank you, Tim for that wonderful introduction. Please extend our gratitude to Tonnie and the entire Delta Defense Team – they’ve been extremely gracious hosts and we’re very, very grateful. This facility is absolutely gorgeous and our city and our county are blessed to have you. Quite honestly, there couldn’t be a better venue for this distinguished address, the annual showcase of our representative government, than an entire company which is based on the premise of responsible liberty. Let’s give a round of applause to Tim and these outstanding Americans who work here at Delta Defense.

Let me start with a few thank yous. First, to our County Executive Office team, thank you for all of your efforts to arrange this ceremonious event. Thank you to my beautiful wife, Jodi, for being here today and for your love and support for the past four years and for the past 22 years. I couldn’t do this incredibly important work without you.

Finally, to my sons, Cael and Drake, who couldn’t be here today due to school conflicts. I love you both very much, and am so very proud of the young men you are becoming. I dedicate this speech to you both, and to every son, daughter and grandchild, who represent the next generation of our great community.

Chairman Schleif, Respective County Board Supervisors, Constitutional Officers, elected and appointed leaders, colleagues, friends, family and fellow Washington County citizens,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to address you today and for taking time out of your busy schedules to gather here together, to hear the state of our beloved county.

As we began preparations for today, I tried to think of the best location to capture the founder’s vision of America, a nation of representative government, founded on responsible liberty. As I reflected on this humbling honor, as I so often do, I harkened back to my deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom, as that experience was my motivation to dedicate my life to public service. It was during this reflection that I was reminded, as Tim alluded to, that on this very date, twenty years ago, I returned from Iraq and Kuwait to Camp Douglas, Wisconsin.

But what brought me to this amazing facility, was that during my reflections I also realized that 2003 was also such a special year for Tim, Tonnie and the Delta Defense Family.

You see, at about the same time that I was stepping off the plane, capping off my contribution fighting to preserve and protect American freedom, and the opportunity for every citizen to achieve the American Dream, Tim and Tonnie Schmidt were putting in the work, embracing that precious freedom we fought for, and seizing their version of the American Dream.



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Twenty years later, and with no doubt countless setbacks and probably a few hurdles, we stand together in this beautiful facility that houses this thriving company created by two remarkable Americans and their unbelievable team of people. Twenty years later, Delta Defense is a company thriving on its foundational values: honest, humble, happy, hungry, and healthy.

And, twenty years later, after dedicating my life's work to the service and sacrifice of my fellow veterans and my Lord, I stand before you today as the first County Executive in Washington County history, delivering the State of the County address for the final year of the maiden term of this esteemed office. I have learned a great deal – more than I could ever describe in this speech – but I do know twenty years later, my fight for our fellow citizens, both present and future, long endures.

Focused now on Our Great Community, creating opportunities for our neighbors to achieve our own version of the American Dream, I could not do any of it without our selfless and passionate team of people. Thank you, cabinet members, department heads, constitutional officers and county board supervisors, many of whom are here with us today, who keep this perpetual fight for responsible freedom alive. Please stand to be recognized.

With that, ladies and gentlemen, it is my distinct honor to report to you today that the state of the Washington County, Wisconsin community is optimistic. The future is extraordinarily bright for those willing to put in the work, those who embrace this country's freedoms, and those who seize the promise of "the land of opportunity". Furthermore, I am immensely proud that the state of our county government is sound, and in the vision of Thomas Jefferson, this team has created "...a government rigorously frugal and simple."

One thing you may not know about me is that while I was deployed to Iraq 20 years ago, I completed a three-credit independent study with my advisor from UW-Whitewater, Dr. Susan Johnson. During this independent study, in the midst of a combat zone, I studied the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Like so many Americans, I was always inspired by President Reagan's optimistic outlook for our nation, balanced by his blunt assessment of the proper role of government, reflecting our great nation's historically healthy balance between a skepticism of government and a hope for the future.

One of the citations of such a Reagan-ism comes from his first Inaugural Address, in January 1981, when he said, "...government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." In the most conservative county in Wisconsin, I think we could find a lot of agreement with that sentiment.

But let's take a broader look at what President Reagan was saying, and the balance he was calling for.

Remember, the context of this speech was an America that is eerily similar to today. Interest rates are skyrocketing, inflation is crippling, the economy is stagnant at best, and government at all levels appears incapable of rising to the challenges of the day.



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Here is that quote in the full context:

*“In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we’ve been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. But if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?”*

Ladies and Gentlemen, isn’t this a vivid depiction of what we have seen since COVID? But, there is something different happening here in Washington County, Wisconsin. In our county government, every day we begin focused on the people, not on the organization, not on the bureaucracy, and not on the institutions. Every day we strive to create an environment - the opportunity - for every single citizen to achieve their own authentic quality of life – their American Dream.

Are you saying to yourself right now, “Wait. Isn’t every government trying to do this?” Well, another thing I have learned in my 20 years since returning home, is that, sadly, the answer is...No. Quite frankly, governments and public institutions at every level across this nation are too busy trying to be all things to all people, are too focused on the wants of the bureaucracy, and not focused enough on the people and the programs serving the people.

Take for example higher education across America, where there are simply too many institutions serving too few students, and where administration and bureaucracy seem to be prioritized before student services and programs. The state of higher education speaks for itself, enrollments are down nationwide, and schools are closing at unprecedented rates.

But here is a good example of the Washington County difference. Rather than waiting for our future to be determined for us, we put a Task Force of diverse thought leaders together to proactively create a solution specific to our community, with the simple directive of revitalizing higher education to achieve better results for students, businesses and our community – the people.

Change is hard, but I am proud of the proactive and pragmatic approach we have taken to this difficult challenge. Although we ran into some hurdles, we have and continue to work with UWM and Moraine Park Technical College to fight for a solution focused on the people, not the bureaucracy or institutions.

You see, the ‘something different’ in Washington County is that we have been laser-focused on the people, and on small and effective government that serves the people. The past four years tell the story here in Washington County. Following the uncertainty of the early weeks following COVID in 2020, while most communities mindlessly shut things down and wantonly invoked government mandates of all kinds as they came down from higher levels of government, Washington County was among the first to open and avoided mandates at every responsible turn.



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Fast forward to today, 3 ½ years later, as locales across America and the world float test balloons for a variety of COVID mandates. You can rest assured that as long as I am County Executive, we will serve the public health needs of our most vulnerable, and there will be no such mandates for our community from Washington County government...responsible liberty...Period! End of story!!!

But that is only the start of what differentiates Washington County. I would implore you to reflect on 2018, when communities across Wisconsin complained about the quality of their roads. Instead of taking responsibility for their own failed spending priorities, they pointed blame at others, like Scott Walker and legislative Republicans. Do you remember the political tropes of that time?

The #Scottholes campaign, for example. Or #JustFixIt, the government sponsored propaganda. Or, how about Tony Evers' "fix the damn roads" gubernatorial campaign schtick. While all of this politicking was transpiring, Washington County focused on the policy problem, not the political jargon.

We listened to the people and responded. We created a comprehensive solution for the next 30 years, and we did it without raising taxes.

We call it our 2050 Transportation Network Sustainability Plan, or '2050 Plan' for short. It is the only plan of its kind in the State of Wisconsin, and it represents the good, hard work of our Chief Public Works Officer Scott Schmidt, and his team of Josh Glass and Mike Vandersanden, and many others. Let's join together in recognizing these guys, as well as the county board members who have stuck to their guns on executing and funding this innovative plan.

Let's be honest though, this work of effectuating change and implementing plans isn't always rainbows and unicorns. As a matter of fact, one of the first political fights with the implementation of the 2050 Plan, particularly the extension of CTH W, north of St. Lawrence.

As with the Hartford Reliever Route discussion a few years prior, as it is with so many of local issues we tackle, the CTH W extension was personal for those who live nearby, including multi-generational Washington County resident, Dennis Gehring. These were the farms he grew up on after all. These are the neighbors who he considers family. Needless to say, Dennis and I were on opposite ends of more than one political skirmish.

In the end, the CTH W extension, just like the Hartford Reliever Route before it, lost on the floor of the county board. But what makes Washington County different than Madison, Washington D.C., or most other communities, is here we don't just take our ball and go home. Instead, Dennis's grandson, Jake, brought an idea for some modification to CTH S that would be less expensive and would solve the problem from the local perspective. I am excited to report to you today that in 2024 we will be constructing a compromise version of Jake's idea, which will make these intersections immeasurably safer and at a much cheaper price tag than the CTH W extension. With us today is Dennis Gehring. Thank you, Dennis. Please extend our gratitude to Jake and your son LeRoy for your spirit of compromise and your neighborliness.



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Neighborliness. “Love Your Neighbor”. In Washington County it was an early refrain during the first year of my tenure as County Executive. During the early months of COVID, it was a guiding principle to avoid government mandates and act out of a spirit of love and virtue. It is a key part of the secret sauce of what makes Washington County so special. It is about the people who call Washington County home, not the government logo that is on our shirts.

Benjamin Franklin said, “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters.” As we watch people like the Governor of New Mexico defying virtue by manipulating emergency government powers to circumvent constitutional rights, we are reminded once again of the overreach of government during COVID, and how lucky we are to live in Washington County.

Our Great Community is comprised of virtuous and kind people, and “Love your neighbor” is more than a saying. It’s more than just a Bible verse. It’s how we live. It’s why we do not embrace government mandates, or overbearing government regulations in our lives or on our property.

My friends, every time we find ourselves relying on government mandates, rules, laws or regulations alone to guide society, things seem to only get worse, not better. When we stop talking to our neighbor and turn to the government, things only get worse.

Let’s look, for example, at a larger community issue. Take the crisis state of housing in America today. Prior to the turn of the last century, land use regulations were extremely lax. Property rights were nearly universal and almost endless.

Inarguably, this laissez-faire approach had its own problems. However, during the progressive era, and especially in the years following WWII, the federal government took a few commonsense principles of local zoning and weaponized them into ruthless rules and regulations that served the purposes of big business and big government, not the people.

The worst examples of this are found in Federal Housing Administration subdivision funding programs, post WWII. Those programs built small houses at a rapid pace and at affordable rates, but by rule - government rule, and deed restriction, they prohibited blacks and Jews.

Fast forward nearly a century, after decades of compounding zoning codes, subdivisions ordinances and comprehensive plans, combined with smothering impact fees, connection fees, permit fees, bonds, and seemingly endless boards, commissions, councils and committees... it is almost debilitating.

What may have started off as a well-intentioned set of rules “most likely to affect their safety and happiness” (as designed in the Declaration of Independence) has turned into weapons used by interests of all sorts to manipulate property rights and serve the bureaucracy and institutions rather than the people.



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For the past two years, we in Washington County have been working to execute Next Generation Housing, to reform ourselves in county government and to incentivize our municipal partners to unwind the tangled knot that is housing development. We have just begun to engage the housing development community to break the back of this crisis for housing that is affordable for our workers.

In Jackson, we are moving forward in an exciting way and expect to break ground on such homes this fall.

The stakes could not be any higher, the future prosperity of our county hangs in the balance. If future generations of Washington County residents can't afford to live here, who will we pass on the torch of responsible liberty to? Together, we must achieve our goal of 1,000 homes by 2032, and we must create the opportunity for private developers, builders and buyers.

As I always tell people, if this issue is a mile downhill, we have moved the ball one rotation. The Next Generation Housing Task Force has done some great work to get us started, and I would like to take a moment to especially thank the Task Force and Deb Sielski who runs the Washington County Community Development team. Deb has been the force behind Next Generation Housing, and I appreciate all the team's hard work.

By the way, stay tuned in the weeks ahead as we have some exciting developments in the Oaks of Jackson, and in our Next Generation Housing Down Payment Incentive program that will be rolled out.

Neighbors, until local zoning and subdivision regulations are simplified, this fight will go on. Until we have building permits, where costs simply require a homeowner's skin in the game, rather than covering every government employee's salary from the janitor, to the inspector, to the administrator, this fight will go on. Until we put an end to outrageous impact and connection fees that add thousands or tens of thousands of dollars to the price of a home, this fight will go on.

Until government is no longer prioritizing regulations and funding for the bureaucracy and institutions, on the backs of housing development, and instead is responsive to the needs of the people, this fight will rage on. Future generations of Washington County residents are counting on us!!!

Time and again over the history of this great American experiment, leaders from various political stripes have answered the call to bring us back to our foundation, government of "We the People". In 1897, in a speech entitled "The Danger Threatening Representative Government", then-Wisconsin Governor Bob La Follette, later known as "Fighting Bob", made this impassioned statement regarding corporations and political cronies:

*"The basic principle of this government is the will of the people...This was to be accomplished by electing men to make, and men to execute the laws, who, would represent in the laws so made and executed the will of the people. This was the establishment of a representative government, where every man had equal voice, equal rights, and equal responsibilities. Have we such a government today? Or is this country fast coming to be dominated by forces that threaten the true principle of representative government?"*





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Ladies and gentlemen, that was over 125 years ago. Nearly a century and a quarter later, I would challenge you to contemplate whether the same could be said of our existing bureaucracies and institutions, and of our existing government from these past generations.

Reagan and La Follette are two very different leaders from different political stripes in very different eras, but they are really saying the same thing. Representative government and responsible liberty are the key ingredients to a thriving society.

Of course, there is no such thing as perfection. The founders told us we would constantly be in pursuit of “a more perfect union.” It’s the nature of human beings. But here in Washington County we clearly understand our purpose, our mission, “to create an environment for residents and businesses to enjoy authentic quality of life.”

That is not to say that county government creates quality of life, just like it doesn’t create jobs. Government can certainly smother quality of life, and it can kill jobs, but it can create neither.

But what government can do, in fact, what it is here to do, is to *create the environment for...quality of life...*for job creation. The Declaration of Independence defines this by saying government exists to “secure these rights”...those being “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”, and is organized to “most likely effect [the people’s] Safety and Happiness.” In other words, government is built for the people, not the people for the government.

We’ve accomplished a lot in the past decade to achieve a shared vision of small and effective government that is built for the people, but we have a lot more left to do. Just in the next two years, the biennial budget I will announce tomorrow will once again lower the property tax rate to levels not seen since Fighting Bob LaFollette was a young Republican Progressive governor of Wisconsin trying to return the power to the people.

We will once again lower property tax collections in 2024, our tax levy, marking the fifth such reduction in the past decade.

While living up to Jefferson’s frugal standard for government, we are also making major investments in his simple standard of government by making our largest investment in shared services ever, allocating over \$1,000,000 by 2025 in county sales tax to offset direct expenses which our municipal partners have historically paid, as well as over \$3,000,000 in indirect expenses through the countywide radio system.

In doing so, today I call on every municipality in our county to put your new shared revenue money toward your constituents’ highest priorities, which was made clear to us. Most of them have clearly said roads are near the top of the list. Then, join us in better using the tax dollars through shared services.



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But let me take this opportunity to impart another lesson that I have learned in my past decade of service to this county. We achieve the most when we are talking to one another and working together to overcome the challenges our communities and our citizens face. This is why we have started to regularly convene the Chief Elected Officials of every municipality. Prior to my arrival at the county, the City of West Bend and Washington County had been in skirmishes over a handful of issues and disputes for a cumulative century.

At that time, under the leadership of County Board Chairman Tennes and Mayor Sadownikow, I had the privilege to work with city administration to develop a city- county agreement that resolved a handful of these disputes involving millions of dollars in projects and services over many years. We didn't negotiate by letter to the editor. We didn't communicate by resolution.

We talked through it, and when we came to an impasse, which occurred more than once, the chief elected officials worked out a solution and brought a unified plan to the respective elected bodies. Let us follow this example from Mr. Tennes and Mr. Sadownikow and lay down arms in the battle of political posturing and rhetoric. Let's focus on the people!

Washington County government is one of the largest employers in the county. With that size comes the advantage of economies of scale that our municipal partners simply cannot achieve. Our county government has the people, the equipment, and the capacity to help in a variety of ways. One recent example of this renewed effort to collaborate has been approved in a new partnership with the City of Hartford to have unified public safety dispatch services. I applaud Hartford's leadership to take a long, hard look and assess the changing environment and the City's future needs.

Police Chief MacFarlan and Fire Chief Stephans led the efforts and are to be commended. Thanks to their efforts, in 2024 Washington County will allocate roughly a quarter million dollars of county sales tax to deliver this critical service to the citizens of the Hartford area. Accordingly, the City of Hartford will save hundreds of thousands of dollars in their annual budget, which can be reprioritized to their citizens' highest priorities.

Here with us today is Chief Stephans. Thank you to the entire Hartford team. Please pass on our sincere gratitude to Chief MacFarlan. We look forward to working together for a Safe and Secure Community for all our citizens, and for future opportunities to collaborate.

This collaboration with Hartford is an excellent start, but it is just a start. In the past several months, we have had similar conversations about shared services with every chief elected official and administrator in the county. We have all agreed that a major area of concern where the county might be able to help by using our economies of scale, is in the delivery of Emergency Medical Services in the years to come. As most every community in the nation faces the issue of declining volunteer EMT's, skyrocketing call volumes and flat funding levels, there is not an easy solution.





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Once again, however, we will bring in a diverse group of leaders to develop a plan focused on the people not on the organizations, and once developed we will work together to fund it together.

The past four years have been an absolute privilege for me. Thank you for that. It has been such an incredible start in creating that environment for...authentic quality of life, but the work goes on and the fight continues. Whether it is local government regulations and fees that are stifling our dire need for a new inventory of starter homes; or the clear necessity of a new vision for higher education focused on the students, businesses and community here in Washington County; or the avoidance of an impending crisis for our citizens, and especially of our seniors, as EMS services are pinched and stretched to a breaking point; one thing is unequivocally clear – our efforts must be acutely directed at putting the people over bureaucracy and institutions.

My fellow citizens, President Reagan was right, “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”

Unfortunately, we find ourselves in such a crisis once again. Take heart, however, our hope is in the Lord and our optimism is not found in government, our optimism is found in the people. Together, “We the People”, will reinvigorate government “for, by and of the people” focused on serving your needs. Because of you, my fellow citizens, the future of Washington County is optimistic.

Thank you! God bless you! God bless Washington County, Wisconsin, and, these United States of America!