



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

Herbert J. Tennes
Government Center
432 E. Washington Street
P.O. Box 1986
West Bend, WI 53095-7986
(262) 306-2200

2022 State of the County Address

Chairman Schleif, County Board Supervisors, Constitutional Officers, elected and appointed leaders, colleagues, my loving wife Jodi, and fellow Washington County neighbors,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today and for taking time out of your busy schedules to gather together and to hear the state of *Our Great Community*.

Before I get started, I wanted to take a moment to recognize a few things. First, congratulations to Sheriff Schulteis and Clerk of Courts Elect Markos-Adjemian on their respective victories Tuesday night. I look forward to working with you both in service to the people of Washington County. Next, besides being the birthday of the Green Bay Packers, as well as yours truly..... on a more somber note... today is also the day that the family of former Washington County Sheriff Clarence Schwartz is celebrating his well-lived life after he passed away last spring. Clarence retired in 1989 after serving in law enforcement for 28 years and serving as Washington County Sheriff for 16 years. We owe a debt of gratitude for his commitment to our well-being, and I send my condolences to his family on this day of remembrance. Please join me in a moment of silence in gratitude for Sheriff Schwartz and his dedicated service to the people of Washington County.

Thank you.

Personal freedom and individual liberty are the landmarks of the great American experiment. They are the definition of the American Dream, as so eloquently articulated in the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

“Liberty” is one of my personal values. It is scribed on the inside of my handy orange notebook. For God and country it holds a special place in my heart. The word is derived from the Latin word *libertas*, in reference to the goddess *Libertas* who portrays freedom. A quick Google search illustrates “*libertas*” often as personal transformation – it’s the name of an addiction treatment center, a human rights center for survivors of torture, a school for orphans – *libertas*, meaning a chance to do better. Its alternate definitions include freedom, frankness, outspoken, independence. I think you can see my affection to the word. 😊 Freedom and liberty are so basic to who we are that we call the day we celebrate our beautiful declaration, “Independence Day.” More recently, we established a second national holiday to celebrate what Abraham Lincoln called our “new birth of freedom” – Juneteenth or Freedom Day. So then, just as in eras gone by, the key ingredient to the next great chapter of American renewal is also *libertas*.

It is for this purpose that I stand here today. It is for this purpose that I desire to be your elected leader. And it is this purpose that provides the drive to do better, to work harder, and to sacrifice more.

In Washington County government we act much more like a business than most governments. We even use concepts and designs from Gino Wickman’s Entrepreneurial Operating System, commonly called EOS, adapted to the operation of county government. We are nimble and proactive, and we can have many balls in the air at the same time. *I* am a visionary, a problem-solver. For example, this summer when I learned of lifeguard shortages and our swimming facilities closing, I contacted local officials and we worked together to develop a plan to keep swimming open for our citizens by utilizing federal ARPA money.



Office of the County Executive

Josh Schoemann, County Executive

Herbert J. Tennes
Government Center
432 E. Washington Street
P.O. Box 1986
West Bend, WI 53095-7986
(262) 306-2200

We didn't just talk about it. We did it. Similarly, when it came to my attention that there was a growing problem with workforce and keeping our next generation of Washington County families living and raising families in Washington County, we didn't just talk about it. We strategically developed a plan, which ultimately became "Next Generation Housing", a real solution to a real problem. We are doing it. Finally, the issue of acute importance is our response to increasing crime that is out of control outside of our southern border. It must be addressed now. We are on it. Thanks to a super majority of the County Board last night, you have a choice for bold action with the Washington County Anti-Crime Plan referendum on November 8th.

As I ponder where we are today, it's hard to ignore our beloved country's political dysfunction, which is evident everywhere you look - the culture wars, division and downright hate - it is easy to lose faith. It is easy to think that America's best days may be behind us. It's easy to let cynicism emerge and, frankly, sometimes it's hard to stay upbeat.

When I think of liberty and freedom in *Our Great Community*, one of the first things that comes to mind is those who have come before us who have contributed so much to our community, like former County Board Chairman Ken Miller. Perhaps you've noticed in the nine years of my tenure, Ken and I haven't always exactly agreed on the tactics of executing county government. Yet I recall numerous visits at the old Kurt Schulz Deli, several long phone calls, and more than a few spirited discussions where Ken and I respectfully and cordially worked through the issues of the day.

Despite our different views, we share a common history and common desire to see Washington County succeed. Ken spent his entire life in service to our nation, our county, and his community.

He was a fulltime technician in the Wisconsin Army National Guard, as well as a former County Board Chairman, and I think his neighbors would attest to just how much he and his family have given back to his community here in Germantown. Ken lived the founding father's vision of constitutional freedom, and *Our Great Community* is better today because of him. Thank you, Ken, for leading us today in the Pledge of Allegiance, for your amazing service and for being a wonderful neighbor!

Ladies and Gentlemen, even in the whirlwind of hard challenges all around us, what I continually hear from our neighbors is they are "just so glad we live in Washington County." Or "Washington County is the only sane place left." Or "If every place could be just a bit more like Washington County, we'd all be just fine."

Well thanks to many generations of men and women like Ken Miller, and as the face of this generation, **I am here today to report to you that the state of Washington County, Wisconsin is strong.**

Indeed, those are the type of comments I love to hear and maybe they're just polite niceties, but I think they represent a sentiment that goes deeper than that. Take a world in the throes of COVID, for example... In early 2021, fear was everywhere as we were gripped by a pandemic. Government was at its very worst, overreaching, and unsteady. But rather than following in lockstep, while most other large venues across the state were still shuttered by their local governments, here in Washington County, many of our amenities chose to be open, including Fair Park!



Office of the County Executive

Josh Schoemann, County Executive

Herbert J. Tennes
Government Center
432 E. Washington Street
P.O. Box 1986
West Bend, WI 53095-7986
(262) 306-2200

In fact, Pro-Life Wisconsin chose Fair Park to host their annual gala. I remember the pride I felt when their State Director Dan Miller told the crowd of hundreds that Washington County is “the freest county in America.” I have been borrowing the phrase ever since, because it perfectly captures the essence of what we strive to be. In fact, Dan Miller has joined us here today. Thanks to Dan for his leadership and for helping us give Governor DeSantis a run for his money!

Friends, the beauty of our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution, which sought “to form a more perfect Union...”, is that these foundational principles were aspirational. It’s *libertas* – as a chance to do better. The founders acknowledged imperfection in themselves, and in all of humanity, with a resolve to continue to improve.

Thus, we each stand here today with the solemn duty to also stand resolute in our efforts to “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves **and** our Posterity...”

While life in Washington County is quite special, we must face the reality that there are some real threats to our great American experiment. Not just my side and your side...I’m right, you’re wrong...the so called socialist progressive left or the fascist nationalist right. The persistence of those ideologies and those movements are a symptom of an underlying societal illness for our nation and our county. The freedom that we love and cherish so much is itself what is at question. We have gotten so lost in fighting amongst ourselves that we have lost sight of the type of freedom that we wish to enjoy. It’s so simple to get caught up in wanting to be right, we are forgetting our duty to build a more perfect union and to build community.

Are we living up to the type of freedom that our founding fathers carefully and constitutionally crafted nearly 250 years ago, or are we redefining America with an absolute freedom, where anyone can do as they please if they don’t harm another human being, however you want to define human being?

It is at the nexus of this small but essential difference that we can take a hard look at the diverging directions of our current political tribes, and through which we must make some important decisions about the future of our county, and eventually the future of our nation.

You have likely heard me tout my record here in Washington County, first as County Manager, then County Administrator, and now County Executive. I am indeed very proud. The size of county government has gotten demonstrably smaller in every thinkable metric.

The tax levy is lower today (2022) than it was a decade ago (2012); The tax rate (2022) is lower than any time since World War I (1918); We have reduced the total number of county employees by nearly 8%; we have fewer buildings, less county owned acreage; less debt. I am the chief elected official in the most conservative county in Wisconsin. We have an excellent, consistent record of smaller government and lower taxes. Wow! We have accomplished a lot.

We did this by going back to basics. Like many of you do around your kitchen tables, we carefully and thoughtfully set priorities and made strategic adjustments. Cost-cutting is not done randomly, with blatant disregard. We funded our community’s priorities and eliminated programs. We were disciplined, thrifty and conservative. And it has paid off.

I know, doesn’t sound much like government, does it?

This accomplishment is worth celebrating. I challenge you to find any other local government in Wisconsin, or maybe even in America, that can honestly make such claims. And yet while we have accomplished so much, the reality is that we have much more to do.



Office of the County Executive

Josh Schoemann, County Executive

Herbert J. Tennies
Government Center
432 E. Washington Street
P.O. Box 1986
West Bend, WI 53095-7986
(262) 306-2200

The bottom line is this, my friends, if you wanted a leader who will just tell you what you want to hear, then you got the wrong guy. I am here for the hard discussions and the hard decisions. When it's time to cut and reduce, and it usually is, I will do it. And when it's time to spend a little more to live up to our principles, I will do that, too.

Unfortunately, we do not live in a bubble here in Washington County. While we enjoy the fruits of fiscal responsibility and conservatism here at home, we are still impacted by those around us. With the pressures of our imperfect union, both within and without, we must acknowledge that in the end we will be judged neither by how low we cut the county tax rate, nor by how many buildings we built or programs we create. No. We will be measured by whether we preserve the rights of our neighbors and pass on the opportunity to the next generation.

Just a few generations ago “sex, drugs and rock and roll” ruled the day. And as is true with each generation, the music of the time mirrored the mood of society. Our cultural norms were mocked, our constitutional freedom discounted, and we entered “the summer of love” where many embraced a natural freedom that represents choices with no consequences.

This natural freedom is eloquently described in the lyrics of Janis Joplin's famous “Me and Bobby McGee” (written by Kris Kristofferson) “Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.” Thus began generations of Americans who cared less about their neighbors, their own babies or even themselves, because ...”feelin' good was good enough for me...”. (Never thought I'd be able to work in a Janis Joplin quote in this speech, but there you have it!)

In his Inaugural Address as Governor of California, on January 5, 1967, Ronald Reagan said, “Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.” Rest assured, the state of *our* county is strong. However, let's not fool ourselves. It is not the next generation that is at risk. ***It is my generation.***

I am among the oldest of the Millennial generation. It is my generation that could not find jobs during the years following the Great Recession. It is my generation that subsequently decided to forgo marriage. It is my generation that postponed having children. It is my generation that was delayed from securing the Blessings of Liberty. It is largely my generation who, across our southern border, are killing one another with guns in their own neighborhoods and homes.

It is largely my generation that, on our side of the southern border, are giving up hope and are overdosing on prescription medications or illegal drugs laced with fentanyl. And it is my generation that is struggling to be able to achieve the symbol of the American Dream – home ownership.

Don't get me wrong, government cannot solve every problem, and it certainly cannot create prosperity, but it absolutely can stifle it and it can make problems much worse. Such is the case with the mainstream starter home. Over fifty years ago, the 1,000 – 1,500 square foot, quarter - third acre lot, ranch or cape cod type home, with a detached two car garage was in its prime.

Neighborhoods like Wingate Subdivision on West Bend's far east side, or the Glenwood Park and Hickory Hills neighborhood right here in Germantown, became the homes of hundreds of working-class Americans, who went to work, raised their families, went to church, paid their taxes and gave back to the community in service clubs and local volunteer fire companies.



Office of the County Executive

Josh Schoemann, County Executive

Herbert J. Tennes
Government Center
432 E. Washington Street
P.O. Box 1986
West Bend, WI 53095-7986
(262) 306-2200

Fast forward to 2022 and those same homes and those same neighborhoods can no longer be built in West Bend, Germantown, and every other community in Washington County, and most of America for that matter. We have regulated those lots out of our zoning codes. We have grown those street widths, added sidewalks on both sides, required the best curbing, and mandated, quote, “free” parks and greenspaces.

Worse, we’ve fooled ourselves into believing the developers will cover those costs. No!! The cost of these upgrades are all passed on to the future homeowner, with a small percentage of course. That doesn’t even account for all the added government permits and fees. Thanks to the added government costs and regulations, neighborhoods and homes like those of County Supervisor Denis Kelling, West Bend Alderwoman Tracy Ahrens, Former Germantown Alderman Art Zabel, and Former Police Chief Pete Hoell are no longer able to be built.

To fight on this battlefield, I am working to keep our next generation at home in Washington County, supporting an environment to earn a piece of the American Dream, an initiative called “Next Generation Housing”. This collaborative effort between county, municipal, school, private and non-profit leaders, will renew the opportunity for mainstream starter homes for the next generation to return home.

As we begin that important work, we find hope in the examples of those who have overcome the litany of these societal obstacles. Take the example of Hannah Schleaf. (*IN AUDIENCE*) Hannah owns a small business on Main Street in West Bend called Evensong. She makes cloth books for children’s bedtime stories, among other topics. Hannah and her young family live in West Bend. She says, “I love where I live. I love where I’ve planted this little biz. What a blessing it is to put down roots here, to get to know families here, to build community here.” Thank you, Hannah, for your inspiration and for eloquently expressing the sentiment of many others. You represent the best of Our Great Community, and precisely what we hope to pass on to the next generation. I welcome you and your family here today.

It’s been just over a half century since Janis Joplin rocked at Woodstock, two years after Ronald Reagan gave the afore mentioned generational warning. Yet here we are, staring at the prospect of the first generation in American history that collectively may not be better off than their parents were. If demography is destiny, we are a dying county. I pledge today that I will fight like hell on every front of this battleground to bring as many of our kids back home as possible, because the data shows if we do nothing, we will begin to depopulate in less than a decade. That’s fewer in church pews, fewer property taxpayers, fewer civic club members, fewer volunteers in fire trucks, and on and on. This is not what we want or expect in Washington County, and it represents the deterioration of that which makes our community great.

Friends, while we have enjoyed a renaissance of conservative governance in Washington County, we are most certainly not immune to the ills consuming our nation. The reemergence of a substance use epidemic has been a byproduct of the COVID pandemic which plays into an already burgeoning mental health crisis. And as I said, while Washington County executed a constitutionally focused approach to ensure freedom during COVID, not every business, organization or school followed the same path. Consequently, the explosion of a society in isolation in the summer of 2020 blew societal shrapnel across our borders, both physically and psychologically.

It is here then, at the intersection of mental health challenges, substance abuse and rising crime, that we must struggle with the type of freedom that we want to embrace.



Office of the County Executive

Josh Schoemann, County Executive

Herbert J. Tennes
Government Center
432 E. Washington Street
P.O. Box 1986
West Bend, WI 53095-7986
(262) 306-2200

The practical consequences are dismal: First, Crime - While our neighbors in Milwaukee continue to set records for violent crime and homicides year after year and day after day. As of this drafting, there have been over five hundred shootings in Milwaukee so far this year, as well as nearly 150 homicides! And it's spilling over our border.

During my tenure with the county, the percentage of bookings in our jail with Milwaukee addresses went from 14% in 2014, to 23% in 2022. While total bookings would be declining if it were just Washington County residents in our jail, out- of- county bookings are keeping our jail busy.

Second, Substance Use – After peaking in the last part of the decade, drug overdoses in Washington County rose to 19 in 2020 and are already at 26 in the first half of 2022. In nearly every case these are people who, if kept clean from substance use, would be productive members of society, contributing to the dire employment situation across our county.

If everywhere else were like Washington County, these drugs would never get in, but as Waukesha County Sheriff Severson said at a recent press conference on the issue, “We are all border counties.” We must act accordingly.

Third, Mental Health Crises – Nearly every active shooter situation that is reported across the country has some complicating component of mental health care challenges.

Sadly, Washington County is not immune to our society's complicated mental health system, and we have seen firsthand the crises that can ensue and the resulting stress that is placed on our public safety resources. Mental health needs to be treated like all other health care, or if we keep doing what we're doing, we can expect to continue getting what we are getting.

With my ear to the ground and my focus on the people, I have heard you loud and clear: **crime from surrounding communities is a scourge on our community.** You don't have to drive far to find a house flying a “Thin Blue Line” flag or shining a blue light from the front porch in solidarity with police, imploring one another to “back the badge.” Here in Washington County, we “Support Our Police.”

There is no doubt that a “Safe and Secure Community” is our number one priority. While other communities have called to “Defund the Police” we have resolutely stood together to “Defend the Police.”

This is not just lip service. We put our money where our mouth is. I reported the financial health to the County Board when I proposed my first budget as County Executive. When I came to the county, the levy used for operations was just over \$34.8 million. The sheriff's office share of the levy was \$15.2 million, a staggering 43.7% of total levy. Today, our operations levy is just over \$36.4 million. Meanwhile, the sheriff's portion of the levy is over \$20 million, or now 55% of the total levy. To spare you the math, that means the sheriff's office levy has grown nearly 33%, while our total operating levy has grown less than 5% in nearly a decade.

As this conservative and priority-focused management has kept us fiscally healthy, now is the time to consider going forward with an eye toward being more proactive. You heard the stats a moment ago. The writing has been on the wall.



Office of the County Executive

Josh Schoemann, County Executive

Herbert J. Tennies
Government Center
432 E. Washington Street
P.O. Box 1986
West Bend, WI 53095-7986
(262) 306-2200

Five years ago, former Washington County Sheriff Dale Schmidt reported to the County Board many of the same concerns we cite today. In his 2017 Annual Report, he wrote, “Going forward, to meet the expectations of our citizens, more staff should be considered in all areas. Corrections, Administrative, Communications and sworn staff needs will all be reviewed...” Now, as the demands on public safety have continued to increase along with the expectations of our citizens, Sheriff Schulteis has completed this staffing needs review.

The Sheriff’s team has put forward a bold proposal in the Washington County Anti-Crime Plan, which will provide more law enforcement resources to our schools; more mental health resources in times of crisis and with non-acute cases out of the justice system; more inter-county and cross-county drug task force engagement; more mental health support and additional resources to combat substance use in our jail; and improved emergency and crises response and management.

To do this we are proposing a \$3.6 million referendum, which will be on the ballot on November 08 to fully fund the Sheriff’s Washington County Anti-Crime Plan as quickly as possible.

Even if we adopt this proposed Anti-Crime referendum, **the county property tax rate will decrease by at least \$.09/\$1,000.** Whether the referendum is adopted or not, your county portion of the property tax rate will likely **GO DOWN**, it’s just a matter of how much. So many referendums are about wants instead of needs. This referendum is not about whether we WANT a new shiny building or field. It is about whether we NEED a proactive response to the crime plague seeping across our border. So, the question our community must decide is this: What do we hate more: growing government or growing crime?

We are able to contemplate this consequential plan, thanks to the outstanding work of our private sector partners, as well as the support of our municipal partners, EDWC, our Community Development Team and so many more. Our efforts are paying off. According to the Department of Revenue, our equalized property value increased 13.3% in 2022, the largest increase in at least two decades. This growth in property value is an indication that our community has grown its means. But we know this is your money that we are talking about not the county’s. So, you the people need to make this decision.

This is a major proposal. This is inarguably a significant increase in the size of the Sheriff’s Office, which is our highest priority. Yet I ran on a platform of “Living Within Our Means” in county government, and I intend to live up to that pledge. It is why I feel strongly that if county government wants to “grow our means” it should be up to the people of Washington County. Yes. There have been proposals and conversations by State and Federal leaders about funding help being on the way. In Washington County, we do not wait around for the State to make up its mind about how to help, and we most certainly cannot wait for our federal partners either.

The Washington County Anti-Crime Plan referendum does not wait around. It gives us a choice for a bold investment in our highest priority area – the Sheriff’s Office. A referendum is the only way for the people of Washington County to fund this proactive effort fully and quickly, promptly getting the Sheriff the necessary resources. Anything less would be modestly investing just enough, and hoping these plagues miraculously stay on the other side of our southern borders.

As County Board Supervisor Linda Gurath noted during last night’s County Board meeting, we’d all be acting a lot more urgently if the active shooter situation at Slinger Middle School a few weeks ago had turned out to be another deadly national tragedy. Stand with me in rejecting the typical politicians’ path of waiting for a crisis to act. Let’s Back the Badge. Let’s support the WCACP. Now. Let’s do this!



Office of the County Executive
Josh Schoemann, County Executive

Herbert J. Tennes
Government Center
432 E. Washington Street
P.O. Box 1986
West Bend, WI 53095-7986
(262) 306-2200

It will take a great deal more than my words today for the light of our great community to penetrate the creeping darkness. We must all take responsibility, beginning here, in our own backyard. It is not for weak knees.

In the words of the famous author and Nazi concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl, “Freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.”

We cannot enable politicians who use band aids to solve problems, waiting for the next guy to come up with solutions. Instead, this work is for the courageous who commit to the uncomfortable work of binding the wounds of a fractured nation. Reward comes from maintaining the quality of life we enjoy in Washington County, and passing it on to our children with wide-eyed recognition that while we long endure, we are impacted by all the things around us.

Dr. King said, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”

There are challenges and controversy all around us. We are part of a larger region, state and nation, and so we must recognize that which is happening around us, and acknowledge the impact it is having on all of us. Together, we must do the bold, hard work, sustain our quality of life, build our community, leaning on one another, rather than relying on the heartless government.

Join with me, in taking the immediate steps necessary to begin our second “new birth of freedom.” No generation is perfect, nor will mine be. But we have *libertas* – a chance to do better, and we mustn’t just leave it to chance.

We must boldly and courageously embrace the choice of freedom based in a virtuous society. We must stand together, embracing constitutional freedom and letting our light shine to combat selfishness and absolute liberty, providing hope for this generation to once again secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves, and then pass it on to our Posterity.

May God Bless Washington County, Wisconsin, and the United States of America