

# Tommy Thompson: Wisconsin needs investments in our universities

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You've probably heard about what happened at Van Hise Hall at UW-Madison this month: two concrete slabs broke off the façade and crashed to the ground in front of the main entrance. Thankfully, no one was injured or killed.

Unfortunately, it is an example that illustrates the need for more investment to upgrade the aging facility infrastructure across the University of Wisconsin System – even though Van Hise Hall wasn't on our priority list.

Take Albertson Hall at UW-Stevens Point, which I toured recently. The fire suppression system is woefully outdated. Pressure from compromised structural integrity has caused windows to crack and shatter. Flooring and wall paneling is buckling. Repairs have been put off so long that it would cost as much to renovate the structure as it would to replace it with a new energy-efficient building that will last for decades.

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How about the Humanities building at UW-Madison? It suffers from water leaks, poor air circulation, severely deteriorating concrete, outdated classroom space, and, let's face it, an unappealing architectural style. Or Cofrin Library at UW-Green Bay, which lacks fire control, has a deteriorating exterior, has limited technological capabilities, and houses aging mechanical systems that have exceeded their useful life.

All of these buildings were constructed quickly and cheaply to accommodate the rush of students after World War II. At this point, it makes no sense for taxpayers to throw any more money into saving them.

We also need investment to build Wisconsin's future. With phase II of the Prairie Springs Science Center at UW-La Crosse, we'll have technology-rich classrooms and labs along with modern mechanicals for Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and other high-demand programs. A new engineering building at UW-Madison could mean the addition of 1,400 undergraduate and graduate engineering students - and future Wisconsin engineers. In 2020, UW-Madison graduated 900 engineering students to compete for 9,000 jobs. Ensuring Wisconsin can compete in science, technology, engineering, math and health care - fields in which we have seen a nearly 50 percent increase in graduates in the past 10 years - requires modern labs that are efficient and effective in delivering education students want and Wisconsin needs.

Let me dispel some myths about the need for this important investment.

First, despite the pandemic, our universities remain open and our students overwhelmingly have experienced college life in person. Even in a different environment, it was important to welcome students to campus. This fall, we are preparing to get back to pre-pandemic levels of in-person instruction.

Second, while online education will become increasingly important, traditional university students are still looking for a campus experience. They want to attend classes in person, meet in study groups at the library, attend social and cultural events at student unions and venues, and participate in intramural athletics. The residential university is not going away.

Third, federal stimulus funding currently can't be used for capital projects. Our universities need to use the stimulus to help cover the \$534 million in estimated losses from the pandemic.

Other than its people, Wisconsin has no greater asset than the public universities that make up our University of Wisconsin System. With 37,000 graduates each year and a 23-to-1 return on investment, there are few better investments. Failure to meet this challenge will result in even greater deterioration in our state than a few crumbling slabs of concrete.

*- Thompson is president of the University of Wisconsin System. He served as Wisconsin's 42nd governor and as Health and Human Services secretary under President George W. Bush.*

