

# UW-Madison: UW center hosts conference honoring Bill Kraus, “Renewing Civic Life in Wisconsin”

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MADISON, Wis. – The University of Wisconsin–Madison’s [Center for Communication and Civic Renewal](#) is hosting a conference titled “Renewing Civic Life in Wisconsin: Fulfilling the Legacy of Bill Kraus” on Nov. 18 at the Gordon Commons in Madison, Wisconsin.

The conference features a keynote lecture from former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson along with panel discussions from prominent Wisconsin journalists, leading academics and political figures considering how we can talk and work across political divides.

This conference intends to spur discussions about how to improve civic connections in Wisconsin while also honoring the legacy of political icon Bill Kraus (1926-2018), who served as a Republican strategist before co-chairing Common Cause in Wisconsin for two decades. The CCCR studies the relationships between communication and civil society, with an emphasis on understanding the political culture in Wisconsin.

Speakers will include former Lt. Gov. Barbara Lawton, former state senate Majority Leader Tim Cullen, Professor Deen Freelon of the University of North Carolina, Professor Danielle Brown of the University of Minnesota, Professor Elizabeth Theiss-Morse of the University of Nebraska, Professor Yphtach Lelkes of the University of Pennsylvania and Professor Dannagal Goldthwaite Young of the University of Delaware. Journalists serving as panelists include Jessie Opoien of the *Capital Times*, Dan Shafer of *The Recombobulation Area*, Toya Washington of WISN 12, and Dan Kaufman, author of *The Fall of Wisconsin*.

“We are so excited to hear from our invited speakers and to share how the research we at the UW do shines a light on how our state is fulfilling, and falling short of, the shining example set by Bill Kraus’ contributions to how we govern ourselves in Wisconsin,” said Professor Mike Wagner, director of the CCCR.

Kraus was not afraid to build relationships across partisan divides, creating some of the most important legislation in Wisconsin history as a result. The current Wisconsin political atmosphere is one of the most partisan and divided in the nation, and the CCCR research highlights how civil society is eroding as a result. This conference seeks to create conversations across partisan lines about the renewal of civil society in Wisconsin in the example of the legendary Bill Kraus.

Kraus was known for a lifetime of selfless civic leadership, including the instrumental management of political campaigns of people like Melvin Laird and Lee Dreyfus. Kraus served as the communications director under Gov. Dreyfus -- an administration known for its bipartisan cooperation. In April 2018, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service created the “Bill Kraus Lifetime Achievement Award.”

This event would not be possible without the support of [The Tow Foundation](#). Established in 1988 by Leonard and Claire Tow, its mission is to promote wellness and access to opportunities so that individuals and communities can thrive. It invests in innovative programs and reform in culture, higher education, journalism, justice and community wellness, and medicine.

“The Kraus family is so appreciative of this amazing and generous gift from Leonard Tow and The Tow Foundation in honor of Bill Kraus,” said Toni Sikes, who was married to Kraus for 37 years before his passing. “The topic of bipartisan civility and cooperation was the topic that Bill devoted much of his life to, and over the course of many years and many political campaigns, he became known as ‘the conscience of Wisconsin politics.’ This conference should provide us all with lessons in how to get back to good government, how we might find our way out of the wilderness and into the light of transparency, fairness, and public input.”

Those who are unable to attend the conference in-person will be able to attend virtually through a livestream, or by browsing the Conference website where panel discussions and lectures will be posted. An edited book of chapters and essays written by the media participants will also be available.



For more information, please contact Professor Mike Wagner at 812-340-0319.