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Amid State Aid Influx, Wisconsin Municipal Spending Growth Outpaces Inflation

Passage of Act 12 preceded spending bump; General government, fire, EMS saw largest increases

Net operating spending for all Wisconsin cities and villages in 2024 rose 4.4% on a per capita basis, outpacing the rate of inflation due in part to an influx of state aid to municipalities.

This came after passage of 2023 Wisconsin Act 12 delivered the largest increase in decades for shared revenue, the state's largest form of general aid to cities and villages, as well as towns and counties.

The subsequent increase in municipal operating spending the following year occurred across its four largest categories: general government rose by 12.4%, street maintenance by 5.3%, fire and EMS by 7.1%, and net police by 5.6%. All outpaced the 2.9% rate of inflation in 2024.

These are among the findings from the Forum's annual update to our Municipal DataTool. The tool provides interactive data on municipal government spending and services for all 607 cities and villages in Wisconsin – from the village of Yuba (population 52) to the city of Milwaukee.

The 10 years of data for each metric come from reports compiled by the state Department of Revenue for 2024 and 2025. Dashboards within the tool focus on property taxes, municipal spending, debt, fund balances, shared revenue (a key form of state aid), property values, and income and population.

For each of the interactive sections of the MuniTool, users may choose data from as many as 10 municipalities to compare and also choose to compare metrics across all municipalities in a county. The tool also includes a "Key Findings" section that summarizes major statewide trends. Some of the statewide key findings include:

MUNICIPAL SPENDING

- The four largest categories of municipal net operating spending – general government, street maintenance, fire and EMS, and police -- are identified collectively as basic spending. (General government spending includes legislative, legal, general or financial administration, and general building or plant spending.) Net basic spending grew 7.0% in 2024, to $797 per capita This outpaced inflation and marked the largest annual increase in the last decade.

- Notwithstanding the large increase in 2024, net basic spending growth throughout Wisconsin has lagged the rate of inflation over the long term. Since 2015, net basic spending has risen 25.1%, while inflation during that same period was 29.6%.

- From 2015 to 2024, fire and EMS spending grew by 31.1%, which may be an indicator of the financial and staffing pressures on the state's EMS and fire service providers, as analyzed in recent Forum work. General government spending netted a 36.6% over that same time period, The remaining two categories of basic spending, street maintenance and police, grew but at more modest rates – 22.0% and 20.2%, respectively.

MUNICIPAL REVENUES

- Following passage of 2023 Wisconsin Act 12, shared revenue aid to cities and villages rose 19.3% to $901.5 million in 2024, an increase of $146 million. This followed many years with relatively little change in shared revenue. The average per capita shared revenue amount increased 18.3% to $204.

- The majority of villages and cities, 569 out of 607, saw shared revenue increases of more than 15%. The median change in shared revenue for communities was an increase of 28.4%, with the formula to distribute the increase favoring smaller communities.

MUNICIPAL DEBT

- General obligation debt grew 5.0% in 2024 to $9.24 billion, the largest proportional increase since 2020. However, debt as a share of the state limit fell again to 31.6%, reflecting a larger rise in property values, which are used to calculate the state cap. This continues a progression of decline from 42.5% in 2016, the high point in our dataset.

- Of the municipalities with general obligation debt, 57.9% reduced their borrowing in 2024. Of the 228 municipalities that added debt in 2024, the three largest increases were in Madison ($39.6 million), Fort Atkinson ($19.4 million), and Sun Prairie ($18.7 million).

PROPERTY TAXES

- Statewide city and village property tax levies rose 4.0% on December 2025 tax bills to $3.23 billion, modestly outpacing inflation. The average levy per capita was $732, a 3.0% increase over the prior year. Some municipalities (12.4%) decreased their levies in 2025, while others (15.6%) increased their levies by more than 10%.

- Despite the increase in levies, the average tax rate per $1,000 of equalized property value decreased 3.2% to $5.52. This is a result of Wisconsin property values increasing at a faster rate than tax levies, continuing a long-running trend.

Click here to access the 2026 Municipal DataTool.

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