

Underappreciated. Underfunded. Perhaps misunderstood. Town government. I confess, as I tackled the questions of how to wisely and equitably fund town governments of Wisconsin, I was uneducated about their inner workings. Although the Wisconsin Town Association indicates town governments are “the most frugal and efficient form of government in Wisconsin....and a form of government....connected to the people, where the people govern themselves and unleash the potential of democracy,” town government is struggling to fund its most basic provisions (Peek, 2022). According to the Town of Lodi Civics article, “Towns must: operate local polling places for elections; conduct property tax assessment, dispute procedures, billing and collection; ensure fire protection and ambulance service; ensure that there is a recycling program; and maintain town highways.”

Currently, Wisconsin town government funds the majority (48.2% in 2020) of their services through property tax levies (*Budgets Get Tighter for Wisconsin Towns*, 2022). While this is a reasonable and effective method for revenue, it falls short of what is actually necessary to keep the aforementioned responsibilities (and often additional services) well-funded. In a report given by the Wisconsin Policy Forum, total debt owed by the state of Wisconsin’s cities, counties, villages and towns rose by 5.4 percent to \$11.04 billion in 2020 — the highest amount of debt on record. Although this number is not exclusively town government debt, it indicates the growing concern of generating revenue for services provided. State aid has been available in the past, but that too, has dwindled and left town government short of needed monies (*Budgets Get Tighter for Wisconsin Towns*, 2022).

What are some ways town government could consider to responsibly fund services? Although property tax generates a sizable and necessary amount of revenue, other options should be explored. Property taxes have continued to rise and, in a sense, they seem to be a punishing financial burden to those who have already purchased their property and are faithfully maintaining it. Perhaps one or more of the following options to supply additional money could be considered.

In several recent studies, Wisconsin has been one of the top consumers of alcohol in the nation (Byrnes, 2021). To Wisconsin's own embarrassment, nearly every one in four Wisconsinites are binge drinkers, the consequence of which is economic loss of almost \$4 billion dollars a year (Linnen, 2019). Although numerous taxes are already imposed on alcoholic beverages, levying additional taxes will drive the price of alcohol up. This could have two benefits: it may alleviate Wisconsin's alcohol-induced financial woes (healthcare, loss of job productivity, law enforcement needs, etc.) and supplement town government funding. The National Beer Wholesalers Association tallies a consumption tax of over \$200,000,000 (Larson, et al., 2020). If Wisconsin raises its beer excise tax, currently at \$.065 per gallon, a considerable amount of money could be generated (Fritts, 2022). With many states' beer tax falling between \$.11 and \$.56, Wisconsin's beer tax is very low. Perhaps, though, a more thoughtful consideration would be taxing the consumer at the point of purchase. Many states, "specify higher alcoholic beverage sales tax rates in lieu of the general sales tax rate." (Fritts, 2022)

In an additional consideration, the Wisconsin Department of Education reported that just over 800,000 students were enrolled in our public school system for the 2020-2021 school year. While "free" education is a benefit of United States living, it may be time to consider additional education fees. While every citizen essentially contributes for kindergarten through 12th grade education in Wisconsin through property tax division/disbursement, it may be wise to apply a small cost to education, directly to parents with children enrolled in K-12 grades. In Nassir Taleb's book [Skin in the Game](#), he reminds readers that people are more engaged when they have contributed to the "game", which in this case, is education. A small fee of \$300 per enrolled student would generate nearly \$2.5 million dollars within Wisconsin. Perhaps more parents would take an active, engaged role in their children's education as well. Education is truly not free anyway, so the fee calls parents to recognize and appreciate the value of education. They have a skin in the game and town government gets a financial boost.

Another creative idea may be offering chickens to Wisconsin residents. In a blog by Patricia Foreman of Murray McMurray Hatchery, she computes the amount of biomass a chicken consumes, which is approximately seven pounds a month. If willing participants add four to six chickens to their yard, there may be waste reduction, reducing waste costs, and environmental improvement, which may lead to monetary savings being captured in part by town government (Foreman, 2010). Foreman writes, “if residents keep family flocks, significant amounts of biomass “waste” could be diverted from the trash collection stream and kept out of landfills. And if this were not enough, consider that the biomass NOT going to landfills won’t create the global warming gas methane.” Diest, a city in Flanders, Belgium, provided two thousand chickens to residents, reducing annual food and yard waste to landfills by over 500 tons (Gignac, 2015). Although solid waste collection is not a specific requirement for town government, many choose to provide it (*Towns in Wisconsin – Local Government Education*, n.d.). Recycling on the other hand, is a service provided....and chickens are recyclers!

One final thought to consider would be increasing taxes for the consumer on utilities such as natural gas, electricity, water and also vehicle fuel for the benefit of town government. These products are typically necessary for most residents in Wisconsin. It places the burden of responsibility on the consumer. Use less, pay less. Use more, pay more. It also will capture the monies lost by electric vehicle users who pay less for road tax as they evade the tax on fuel but consume additional electricity as they charge their vehicle battery.

In conclusion, a few fresh ideas may be found as reasonable alternatives or additions to property taxes: raising excise tax on alcohol, an education contribution, and utilities and gas tax. It seems evident that a change should be encouraged and is necessary to put the town government budget back on track. Surely these ideas would be met with opposition, as most increases in monetary decisions are, but they fairly tax each person and give individuals some control. Ultimately, it is beneficial to fund our town government because they, “are a general-purpose unit of government, providing a broad array of

services” that we often fail to appreciate (WI Towns Association). By making several revenue changes, we can contribute more substantially to the town government that daily serves us.