



**OCONOMOWOC ENTERPRISE**

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# COMMENTARY

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## GUEST OPINION

### State elected officials, please listen and help ...

By now, almost everyone has had the opportunity to review their 2022 property tax bill. Every area elected official has heard the frustrations with the increases. Even from those who said they understand and accept the increases, questions are being asked about what can be done about property taxes and what are the projections for 2024 and beyond. Each community has and will continue to explain their current increases in property taxes as well as the local and statewide increases in property values. The Oconomowoc Area School District will also be sharing more information on the rationale for their increases.

Across our area, the primary driver of the municipal levy increases this year are associated with the Western Lakes Fire District and OASD. After an extensive study, the WLFD board, with the cooperation of local elected officials, shared information with residents about the shortage of emergency responders as well as the uncompetitive wage rates being paid for these critical personnel compared to other communities in southeast Wisconsin. Emergency response rates were increasing while WLFD staff are being recruited away by other districts offering higher wages and more family-friendly work schedules. A referendum was placed on the Aug. 9, 2022, ballot to increase funding of WLFD. While some communities did not support that referendum, the WLFD board did vote to approve an increase in service fees for the 2023 budget of approximately 60% of the amount requested from each community in the referendum. The communities that approved the referendum have the funding to cover the increases; those who did not approve their referendum had to find different ways to pay for these necessary emergency services such as separate fire fees, new debt service, or other avenues. Paying for critical local services like police, fire, and EMS by referendum is not sustainable as those costs should not be born solely by property taxes.

These comments are not intended to rehash the issues associated with the WLFD referendum or the challenges being faced by OASD. Those issues will continue to be discussed and debated at the local level in the months ahead. This letter is meant as a "call to action" for both local elected officials as well as every taxpayer. As municipalities (cities, towns and villages) struggle to pay for critical services with local property taxes, the state of Wisconsin is projecting a \$6.5 billion budget surplus; yes, that is billion with a "B." Current projections of surpluses for the next biennium are even higher. Some of those funds could be allocated to communities to assist with what is becoming a statewide crisis of fire, police, and other emergency responders; some of those funds could be allocated to school districts to help with things like aging infrastructure, some for critical local infrastructure like roads. What about tax refunds or relief which could be implemented for all taxpayers? Instead, those we sent to Madison to represent us continue to ignore our requests for assistance.

In 2006, the state Legislature imposed strict property tax levy limits on all municipalities along with the promise of supporting critical local services by sharing state revenue. Then, provisions in 2011 Wisconsin Act 32 extended the levy limit program on a permanent basis. Supporting local communities has not happened, even as costs for services continue to rise. The chart in Figure #1 illustrates the fact that shared revenue has declined as state sales and income tax have increased as noted in Figure #2. So, while the state is awash in excess tax revenue, many communities in our area and across the state have been forced to place property tax referendums on the ballot to meet these increasing costs for our first responders in Figure #3. Public safety is non-negotiable — it is the lifeblood of healthy communities.

It is time for everyone who represents you, from town, city and village leaders to the Legislature and the governor, to begin working together to solve this crisis. The \$6.5 billion in surplus funds from the money each of us sent to Madison through income taxes and/or sales taxes, could provide significant relief for property taxpayers. Yet little if anything is being done to address these issues because of partisan politics. Enough! It is time we hold those we sent to represent us at the Capitol accountable. There are many demands on the state for your tax revenues, but what is more important than public safety? Contact your state senator, state representative, and the governor; let them know we demand and deserve action.

In the coming weeks, many of the communities will be providing more information about the property tax increases in our respective communities as well as what we are hearing from Madison. We will include explanations of how equalized and assessed values are determined; which taxes we control at the municipal level versus taxes allocated to each community by other taxing authorities; what are our fixed costs of operations and those we can control; and our goals and expectations for the future. But let us assure you, we have heard your voices; as taxpayers we are dealing with many of the same frustrations and we are working on solutions, but we need your help.

**Robert Magnus**  
Mayor of the City of Oconomowoc

**Tim Clark**  
President of the Village of Lac La Belle

**Robert Hultquist**  
Chairman of the Town of Oconomowoc

**Jack Riley**  
President of the Village of Summit

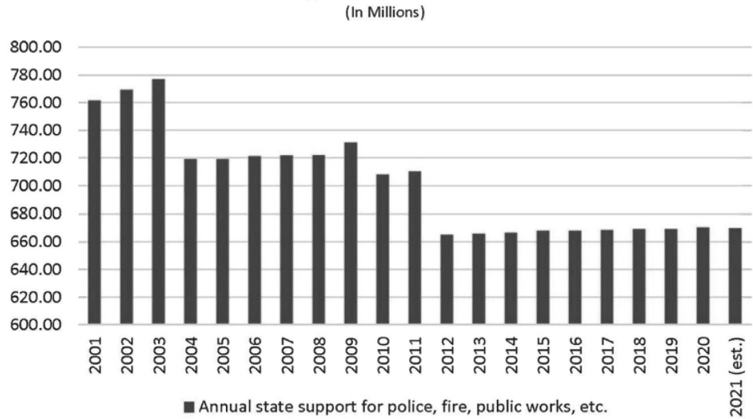
**Jack Nissen**  
President of the Village of Dousman

**Cheryl Rupp**  
Chairman of the Town of Ottawa

**Tim Klink**  
Chairman of the Town of Merton

Figure #1

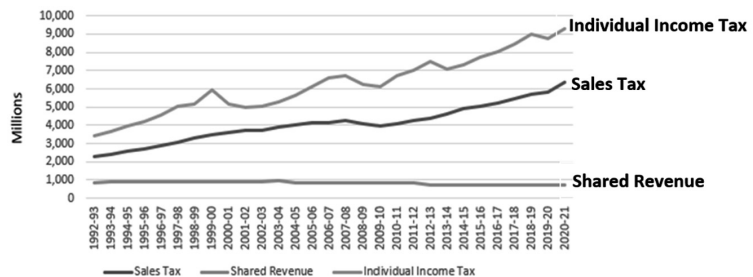
### Declining Shared Revenues



Source: Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 2019-2021 Budget Summary  
[https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/budget/2019\\_21\\_biennial\\_budget/](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/budget/2019_21_biennial_budget/)

Figure #2

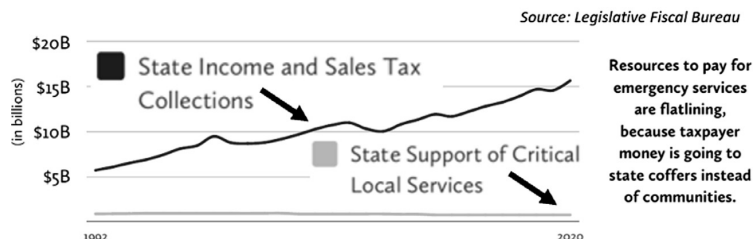
### Comparison of Sales Tax Revenue, Individual Income Tax and Shared Revenue



Source - Legislative Fiscal Bureau

Figure #3

### State Support of First Responders is Flatlining



Resources to pay for emergency services are flatlining, because taxpayer money is going to state coffers instead of communities.