



# DANE COUNTY

**Kathleen M. Falk**  
County Executive

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TO: Citizens of Dane County  
County Board Chair and Members of the County Board  
Department Heads and Elected Officials

FROM: Kathleen Falk  
Dane County Executive

It is with a mixture of sweet sadness and hope for the future that I inform you of my intention to step down as county executive next April.

It has been the most extraordinary honor to serve you for what will be 14 years in April. I am deeply grateful for the challenging and rewarding job you have given me. I am daily inspired by the work before us, by your constant confidence in me and by your wise counsel and daily efforts to make Dane County the best place in the world to live. Thank you for helping me serve.

I have been elected more times than any previous Dane County Executive (four times); I have served longer than any other Dane County executive (14 years is 5 years longer than the previous longest term); and I believe I am the third longest serving county executive in the history of the state. My election as the first woman Dane County Executive was historic; I am grateful those days are but distant memory and that now any woman will believe she has the opportunity to serve.

I ran for reelection 2 years ago with 2 promises I've now completed: to build the first nationally-unique community manure digester to clean up our lakes and grow green energy and our dairy industry. I am so pleased we broke ground this summer and we will turn on the switch in a few months. And we're already working on the next digester! I also promised to launch a coalition of citizens to change our culture of alcohol abuse. We've taken on the "elephant in the room" that's hard to talk about in our state. Our Coalition is up and running and growing – and the innovative programs we began are making a difference. Just like anti-smoking and recycling movements were successful over time, so will we change our culture and make lives better for so many.

Why now? As I approach the 7th decade of my life, I believe it is time for me to find that next chapter of how I can make a contribution. I am healthy and happily married; I'm not angling for another political job; and I am replaceable. Quite simply, this is the

right decision at the right time for the right reasons. During the 4 terms you have elected me, my goal has not wavered: work on the problems before us so we can have the best place for all to live. My guiding principles were taught me by my parents and grandparents: Don't waste land, don't waste money, and don't waste kids. I'd like to think they'd be proud of my 14 year record on each:

### Land

We have done so much together! No matter what part of the county, no matter age or gender, no matter conservative or liberal, Dane County citizens love our land and lakes. It is a shared value that insures our future.

My effort to protect our natural resources started early in my first term with my agreement with Governor Thompson to protect farmland in the northwest part of Dane County as part of the Highway 12 construction. With a first-of-its-kind Purchase of Development Rights, we protected thousands of acres in the most productive farm areas in Dane County.

The unlikely team of Falk and Thompson produced another win for conservation when he agreed to purchase the land needed for one of Wisconsin's two Centennial State Parks on the shores of Lake Waubesa, next to the County's Lake Farm Park. Our park, that purchase, the E-Way, and DNR lands to the west became a cooperatively managed 2500-acre state park in the heart of our metropolitan area.

The Conservation Fund referendum followed in 1999. We brought together conservationists and developers to support the referendum in a way never seen before. It passed with 70% of the vote and made possible lots of financial assistance from federal, state, and local governments and conservation organizations. With \$30 million authorized over the following ten years, the Conservation Fund has protected about 11,000 acres. It led to new parks, park expansions, trails, large swaths of wetlands, prairies, streams or rivers, lakes, and woods in public ownership and inspired citizens to donate beautiful tracts of land around the County.

The health of our waters is a major priority. We helped restore Token Creek near Windsor early in my first term and witnessed the first stream in the state to be removed from the US EPA's impaired water lists -- the West Branch of the Sugar River in 2004. The waters that drew the most of my attention have been the Yahara Lakes. We are in the midst of a six-year improvement of the Chain's lock and dam system and completely upgraded the Dane County Sheriff's Lake Patrol and our weed-cutters.

But water quality is my overriding concern -- "let's keep the lakes blue and the lawns and fields green" has been my mantra.

In 2007, our efforts to restore better health to lakes took comprehensive shape with the Land & Water Legacy Fund. This program funds efforts to attack non-point pollution, especially the movement of phosphorous, sediment, and trash into our lakes. It has funded the purchase and restoration of drained wetlands in the upper Mendota watershed and the rehabilitation of old stormwater sewers and outfalls around our lakes so they trap sediment and litter.

The Land & Water Legacy Fund hit a milestone with the groundbreaking for the county's first community cooperative manure digester in Waunakee – one of the few in the county to remove phosphorous. Besides improving manure management for dairy farmers and generating green, renewable energy, it drastically reduces phosphorous from entering our lakes. This project won the support of Governor Doyle and State Legislators (\$3.3 million per digester). A second is on the way near Middleton.

Throughout my terms, we have been restoring trout streams and securing permanent, public access to those streams, with long stretches of top quality streams throughout the Sugar River and Gordon Creek watersheds.

With the Capital City Trail as the crown jewel of our trail system, we have always grown that system. We have expanded and marked bike paths on all our county highways as we re-pave and improve them. New off-road trails have been created or are being planned, like the Cam-Rock Trail and the Lower Yahara Trail. More segments of the Ice Age Trail are created every year. With volunteers' help, we now have canoe trails throughout the County. And we always promote new forms of healthy, outdoor recreation, with, for example, disc golf courses and dog parks.

Education and cooperation have been hallmarks of our environmental efforts. A great example is the seven year old Clean Air Coalition of businesses, state, county, and local governments to reduce air pollution, especially ozone-creating chemicals and asthma-aggravating particulates.

But there also must be a regulatory element to protecting the environment, especially on waters. Again, we accomplished some important firsts.

- First Wisconsin county to ban lawn fertilizers containing phosphorous. Our approach was affirmed by the federal Court of Appeals and became the basis of state law.
- Very strong stormwater and erosion control regulations; one of the first counties in our nation to include a thermal standard for runoff and to encourage infiltration (in order to protect trout streams).
- First Wisconsin county to regulate winter spreading of manure.
- Ban of yard waste from our landfill (it's composted).

We continue to meet new challenges and to work with new partners. The budget I just proposed takes another big step in that direction with the Partnership for Recreation and Conservation (PARC). PARC will enable the County to assist in funding local governments and nonprofits in creating great conservation and outdoor recreational projects with real, regional benefits -- like MAYSA's expansion of Reddan Soccer Park or Cross Plains and Mazomanie's restoration of Black Earth Creek.

## Kids

When my son cut his finger, I gave him a bandaid. But then I tried to figure out how to keep him from hurting himself again. With thousands of our citizens hurting, it is vital

that we do whatever we can, whenever we can, to alleviate their suffering. And so we have committed half of our entire county budget each year to a wide range of services for kids, people with developmental and physical disabilities, seniors, citizens suffering from mental illness or alcohol or drug addictions. We have created innovative programs no other county in the country provides. We fund programs at levels few other counties provide. But I will never say we have done “enough”; nor is it enough to just fund programs.

Working together as elected officials we have changed entire systems so that kids and families have a better chance to succeed – so that there is fundamental improvement in their lives. I devoted more time, energy and political capital on the reforms we have made to the criminal justice system, starting 13 years ago when I first vetoed a measure passed by the then-conservative county board that would have had us add about \$30 million more in new jail beds. I added 111 new deputies to the sheriff’s department, but then I launched into the very serious and challenging work of creating programs to turn criminals around, to keep them from repeating crime and help them lead successful lives as an underlying framework to improve public safety. The naysayers aren’t naysaying anymore: they see the success, especially in the reduced taxpayer costs that are otherwise sunk in our jail. We have turned the tide here and there are now efforts across the state to be “smart on crime” like we are doing here.

But I have to mention another innovation. Despite our county’s significant commitment to kids and families to help those most in need, we still have many kids living below the poverty level – not because their parents don’t love them but because their parents face barriers: no high school diploma, mental health and AODA illnesses, minor criminal records that keep them from getting a job. These barriers shouldn’t be “sentences” to lifelong poverty for our kids. With our Early Childhood Initiative we began 5 years ago, working one family at a time, we are helping parents get and keep jobs and we are seeing them work their way to better futures. Now, 250 families later, working in 4 neighborhoods in the county, the work is more important than ever and we need to keep doing even more.

## Money

Programs cost money. Property taxes hit people hard. I do not forget this on any day in this job. With 5000 properties in arrears in paying their property taxes, the need to find innovative cost-effective solutions is constant. Despite the economic challenges that the national depression has foisted upon us, we have in 14 annual budgets prioritized our citizens top two priorities—public safety and humans services—and we have controlled property taxes to modest increases that are affordable and yet make us, year in and year out, reinvent government to be more efficient and to generate new sources of revenues.

We have merged many departments (e.g. public health, land and water); we have aggressively obtained new outside revenues (such as federal MA Crisis and stimulus dollars), we have created opportunities out of problems (such as converting our methane gas from the landfill to electricity and making \$4 million in revenues a year for our taxpayers). We have teamed with other units of government to save dollars. (e.g. roads and salt use, shared law enforcement space with townships.)

During the almost 14 years, I have managed county government thru the worst snowstorms in decades, record high water levels, dangerous tornados and drought, economic recession and depression. We have built a new 21st century courthouse that will serve us through this century; we have built the greenest and most beautiful airport in the nation; we have so improved our fabulous free zoo that we are now entrusted to be the home to internationally endangered critters and we are setting historic records for attendance; and at a time where most counties are abandoning their nursing homes, we are about to open a brand new nursing home that is state of the art 24 hour-a-day care for the most vulnerable citizens among us. We were the first county in the state to lead on many issues of social justice, including fairness for gay and lesbian employees and citizens, hard working to eliminate racial disparity in our criminal justice system.

We have proven you can have programs, policies and fiscal prudence together. In my 14 budgets, the average increase in county property taxes on the average Madison home has been \$12.87.

When I ran for reelection two years ago on a platform of “manure and too-much-drinking,” many chuckled and teased me that my platform wasn’t exactly a typical nor winning political platform. But citizens KNOW what the problems are and they will vote for those who are willing to step up to the plate and try to solve them. I hope this is the course the next county executive takes: Work on the problems that matter the most. And that leads me to “what happens next?”

#### Next Steps for an April Election

Turning to the next steps, I am timing this so as not to require a special election that would be off-cycle of the normal course of elections and so as not to engender costs to taxpayers. I also wanted to provide as much time as possible, here it will be six months, so that citizens can decide whether to run for the position. The next step is the introduction and passage of a county board resolution that calls for a “special election” to be held on the same date as the regularly-scheduled spring election on April 5, 2011, with a February 15 primary if necessary, and with nomination papers due January 4. I expect there will be a spirited and competitive race.

I don’t know what the next chapter is for me; but changing the world is what I will continue to do! I ask for your counsel to help me find it and I ask for your continued confidence in me. But let me end as I began this memo, with my profound gratitude for the honor of serving the one-half million Dane County citizens; and for serving with 2500 hardworking county employees and elected officials – and especially my immediate staff who gave 110% of the highest level of integrity and public service every single day. Thank you all for all that you have done to help me serve.