



## County Executive Melissa Agard State of the County 2026

### **Intro**

Thank you all for being here today, and welcome to the first-ever State of the County Address in Dane County history.

It is an honor to stand before you as your County Executive at such an important moment for our community and our future.

Before I begin, I want to take a moment to recognize the people who have made this journey possible.

I first want to thank my four boys - Devin, Bailey, Keanan, and Trystan. I'm eternally grateful for their love and support.

I also want to express my deep appreciation to my entire family, my community, my staff, and everyone who has supported me along the way.

Thank you to Vice President Lambert Cleveland, Jr., Olivia Morsbach, and Representative Joers for being part of this event today.

And I want to recognize our county-wide elected officials, County Board Supervisors, department heads and county staff, our state elected officials, our municipal and community partners, and everyone else who has come out today to hear about our shared future here in Dane County.

After my inauguration in November of 2024, I headed back to the City-County Building for my very first meeting as County Executive.

I sat down with our County Controller.

And the news he had for me was not exactly the kind of news you hope to hear on your first day on the job.

Dane County was facing a \$31 million structural deficit.

We immediately got to work alongside department leaders, employee groups, and the County Board to stabilize our finances while protecting services.

We worked department by department to identify savings and improve efficiencies.

We examined programs, spending, and operations closely, looking for ways to restore stability while continuing to deliver the services residents count on.

Folks, this is the hard work of government. It is collaboration. It is difficult conversations. It is finding solutions together.

And because of that work, we made it through that budget cycle without a single layoff.

And in just one year, we cut that structural deficit in half.

That is the Dane County way.

When challenges arise, we do not turn on each other. We turn to each other for support.

And that spirit has defined this first year of our administration.

Dane County is a remarkable place because we are not just one kind of community.

We are 60 municipalities: cities, villages, and towns working together across more than twelve hundred square miles.

We are urban neighborhoods and rural landscapes. We are one of the strongest agricultural regions in Wisconsin **and** a growing hub for technology, research, and innovation.

From our small towns to our thriving downtowns, from family farms to global industries, what makes Dane County special is that we continue to grow while staying connected to one another.

Dane County is a thriving community because we welcome people from all walks of life and recognize that our diversity is our strength.

No matter where someone was born, who they love, what language they speak, or how they identify, everyone deserves the opportunity to belong and succeed here.

This has been a year of action.

Not standing still.

Not waiting around for someone else to solve problems for us. But stepping up and moving Dane County forward.

## **Environmental Leadership**

Nowhere is that more evident than in our work to protect the environment and preserve the natural spaces that define this county.

When people think about Dane County, they think about our lakes, our parks, our farms, our trails, and the landscapes that make this place special.

Conservation is part of Dane County's identity.

And with the conservation legacy of Kathleen Falk and Joe Parisi, those are big shoes to fill.

Recently, Dane County took historic action with the purchase of property in the Town of Dunn and the decision to gift that land to the Ho-Chunk Nation.

This 160-acre property signifies the largest land gift in Dane County history.

And more importantly, it is an opportunity to return land to the Ho-Chunk Nation, whose ancestral homeland this has always been.

That is what action looks like.

Not just honoring history with words, but with meaningful decisions.

And at a time when our federal and state government are stepping away from conservation efforts, Dane County is forging ahead.

Led by our Land and Water Resources Department - we are continuing to strongly invest in our Conservation Fund.

Because when opportunities arise to preserve environmentally sensitive land, protect water quality, expand recreation, or restore habitat, Dane County needs to be ready to act.

And we are also planning for the future through the creation of a Sustainability Campus led by our Department of Waste and Renewables that will bring together recycling, reuse, innovation, and economic opportunity in one place.

And one of my favorite parts of this first year in office was completing my 25 for 25 challenge by visiting all of our Dane County parks in 2025.

My message to everyone is simple: get out there and enjoy these incredible public spaces. These are **your** public lands.

So go see the new shelter and accessible playground at Mendota County Park. Go play disc golf at Token Creek. Walk up to the chapel at Indian Lake.

I will continue to invest in and celebrate these gifts to our community.

Through our Office of Energy and Climate Change, Dane County continues leading on clean energy and climate action across the region.

And this office has been busy.

This year, thanks to the generous support of the Coulliard family, we announced a new solar pavilion at Henry Vilas Zoo along with a commitment to make the zoo fossil fuel free by 2040.

When that work is complete, Henry Vilas Zoo will become the first free AZA-accredited zoo in the country to achieve fossil fuel free status.

That is exactly the kind of bold thinking we need more of.

The record-breaking weather we experienced this spring was another reminder that our climate is changing and we need to be ready.

That is why I directed the Office of Energy and Climate change to examine our climate resilience readiness and come up with a plan.

Because we know that it is not **if** we experience more extreme weather events, but **when** the next event will occur.

I have to lift up one more major environmental milestone we achieved this past year.

All of our Dane County government operations are now powered through 100 percent renewable energy offsets across all county facilities.

We have more ambitious goals on the horizon, but this is an achievement to celebrate today.

And it reflects a broader belief that leadership means being willing to take action ourselves.

## **Justice Reform**

Another area where Dane County has taken meaningful action this year is justice reform.

Because public safety and justice are not competing values.

The goal must always be a system that keeps communities safe while creating pathways for accountability, rehabilitation, and better outcomes.

This year, Dane County launched the Assessment, Treatment, Transition and Aftercare Program - or ATTA - through our Juvenile Court Program.

The goal is simple: intervene earlier, support families, and create better outcomes for young people before they enter the correctional system.

We are already seeing positive early indicators thanks to our staff at the Juvenile Court Program.

We also reconvened the Dane County Community Justice Council after a hiatus.

Because lasting reform requires collaboration.

The Community Justice Council is led by our Office of Justice Reform.

It brings together judges, our District Attorney, our Dane County Sheriff, public defenders, county agencies, and community organizations to work toward a more equitable and effective justice system.

We also continued our work toward acknowledging historical injustices in our community by supporting the Prejudice in Places initiative through our Planning and Development Department.

Through this effort, and the hard work of staff, residents can now formally renounce discriminatory racial covenants attached to property records in Dane County.

On a personal note - during this process I learned that **my** house had a discriminatory covenant placed on my deed and I was proud to be one of the first residents in Dane County to officially renounce that hateful language.

Acknowledging history matters **if** we want to build a more inclusive future.

And this year, Dane County is also launching a new Community Court.

Community Court is built around a simple idea: for many low-level offenses, connecting people to services and support is more effective than cycling them repeatedly through the justice system.

The program will connect participants with housing assistance, behavioral health services, treatment programs, and employment support designed to reduce recidivism and help people regain stability in their lives.

We cannot talk about justice reform without recognizing the public safety professionals who make safety possible every single day across Dane County.

That includes our **“first”** first responders - our 911 communicators - who are often the very first calm, steady voice in a moment of crisis.

It includes the deputy sheriffs who respond to calls in every corner of Dane County, meeting people on some of the hardest days of their lives with professionalism and care.

It also includes our 17 circuit court judges, our entire courthouse staff, our DA's staff, pre-trial services team, and family court staff whose work is essential to a justice system that is both effective and fair.

I also want to recognize the dedicated professionals in the Dane County Medical Examiner's Office.

In moments of sudden and unexpected loss, they serve families with compassion, professionalism, and dignity.

They provide answers, support public safety and public health, and work closely with law enforcement and the courts to ensure every case is handled with care and integrity.

All of these professionals I've mentioned help hold our system together, support families, and ensure people are treated with dignity while our community remains safe.

In Dane County, we value people feeling safe in their neighborhoods, in their homes, and in their daily lives - and these are the people on the front lines making that happen.

## **Economic Development**

Let's talk about the economy.

Dane County is the fastest growing county in Wisconsin.

People want to move here because of the opportunities and quality of life this community offers.

I want to highlight a few ways Dane County is helping build for the future

First, you are all sitting in the Exhibition Hall of a campus that will be dramatically transformed over the next decade.

For generations, the Alliant Energy Center campus has been one of the most important gathering places in Dane County.

And at the center of it is the Veterans Memorial Coliseum.

This year, we took a major step forward by moving ahead with a public-private partnership to renovate the Veterans Memorial Coliseum and revitalize the broader Alliant Energy Center campus.

The proposal includes nearly \$100 million in private investment into the Coliseum which significantly reduces financial risk for county taxpayers.

A renovated Veterans Memorial Coliseum will strengthen tourism, attract new events, support local businesses, create jobs, and position this campus for the future.

This is a generational opportunity for Dane County.

And it reflects something I strongly believe: **Dane County should not be afraid to dream big.**

We are also dreaming big at the Dane County Regional Airport.

In 2025, Dane County Regional Airport set an all-time passenger record.

And this year is already off to another strong start.

We are continuing to expand service with new nonstop flights to Boston and Raleigh.

The airport is one of the strongest economic engines in south central Wisconsin, generating billions of dollars of economic impact and supporting more than 10,000 jobs across the region.

But we are not stopping there.

Because when our airport grows, Dane County grows with it.

And frankly, I do not think “regional airport” fully captures where we are headed anymore.

What do you think about “international airport”?

Yes, we are moving forward.

In fact, just this week, we began working on the paperwork that will be submitted to Customs and Border Protection as we pursue international designation for Dane County’s airport.

While this is a long, multi-year process - this is an exciting first step.

And let me make something clear: economic development is not just about major projects.

Infrastructure and public works is economic development.

Our highway department clearing and maintaining our county roads allowing people to get from point A to point B is economic development.

Supporting veterans and surviving spouses is economic development.

Bolstering the arts in our community through the work of Dane Arts is economic development.

Promoting the Wisconsin Idea through our UW-Extension Dane County office is economic development.

Protecting our agricultural heritage is economic development.

Centering the work of the county around economic development will create a rising tide that will truly lift all boats across our community.

## **Community Services**

Next, I want to talk to you about community services.

When I served on the Dane County Board, I was honored to serve as the chair of the Health and Human Needs Committee.

I had a front row seat witnessing the gritty, tenacious work being done at our Human Services Department, supporting the most vulnerable residents in our community.

Simply put - one of the clearest measures of a strong county is whether people can get help when they need it.

And every single day, that is exactly what the Dane County Department of Human Services works to do.

One of the biggest parts of that work is behavioral health.

Because the truth is, every family in our community has been touched by mental health or substance use challenges in some way.

And too often, people do not know where to turn until things reach a crisis point.

That is why Dane County continues investing in a behavioral health system that connects people to care earlier and more effectively.

Through the Behavioral Health Resource Center, residents can access help regardless of insurance status, income, identity, age, ability, or immigration status.

The Center just celebrated its 5th year of operations and thanks to the hard work of our human services staff has seen a 67% increase in the number of people served per year since 2021.

In our last budget, Dane County also added an Opioid Coordinator position to strengthen our response to substance use, addiction, and overdose prevention.

That coordinator, together with the outstanding team at Public Health Madison & Dane County, is providing critical leadership by helping support effective, community-based responses to substance abuse and addiction.

When people can access care before a crisis escalates, Dane County is stronger.

Human Services is also about making sure older adults and people with disabilities can live with dignity, independence, and connection.

Through Aging and Disability Services, Dane County helps residents and families navigate systems that can often feel overwhelming.

Badger Prairie Health Care Center also plays a vital role in Dane County's continuum of care, providing high-quality skilled nursing and rehabilitation services for some of our most vulnerable residents.

And through our Children, Youth, and Families division, Dane County works every day to protect children and support families during some of the most difficult moments they may ever face.

I also want to recognize our foster families - after all May is National Foster Care Month.

Dane County continues to need more foster parents, especially for teenagers, because every young person deserves stability, support, and adults in their life who believe in their future.

This is my public call for people to consider signing up to help a child in need.

I've also heard from so many people in our community that the cost of housing is top of mind. I'm proud that our Dane County Affordable Housing Development Fund helped support 494 new affordable housing units funded in the last year alone.

And finally, it should be noted that not all community services are within the Human Services Department. I have to give a shout out to our Library Services Department who bring joy across our county anytime the bookmobile comes to town.

Community Service is also our Emergency Management Department who, at my direction, facilitated the purchase of a new ambulance we unveiled this week that will support our rural communities.

Community Services is also our office of Civil Rights is ensuring fairness inside our county government and across all of Dane County.

So thank you to our Human Services staff, all our staff that help people in need, and our community partners in the purchase of service community for the work you do every day.

## **Good Government**

All of the things I have highlighted today require a strong foundation of good government.

This year, I directed our Department of Administration to launch two major initiatives.

First, a review of Dane County contracting practices to improve transparency, accountability, efficiency, and communication with our partners.

Because taxpayers deserve confidence that public dollars are being managed wisely and responsibly.

This is also a two-way street to give clarity and certainty to our purchase of service partners.

Secondly, we began an asset and space utilization study to make sure county facilities are being used effectively and responsibly as government and service delivery continue to evolve.

Taxpayers deserve a government that plans ahead, adapts, and uses public resources wisely.

## **County Workforce**

None of this work happens without the people who show up every single day to serve this community.

To every Dane County employee - I simply want to say thank you.

Whether you are plowing snow before sunrise, helping a family through a difficult moment as a social worker, caring for animals at the zoo, protecting public health, maintaining our parks and roads, answering emergency calls, supporting our courts, or keeping county services running behind the scenes, you are the reason this county works.

You are the people who turn plans into action and public service into real impact.

Our community is stronger because of you, and I am deeply grateful for all that you do.

## **Strategic Vision**

All of these priorities and initiatives led us to ask an important question:

How do we make sure Dane County is not just responding to challenges as they arise, but planning intentionally for the future?

That work led to the creation of a strategic plan - entitled **Dane County in Action**.

The plan has four strategic pillars that will guide this administration moving forward:

- Community Services Delivery.
- Economic Development.
- Justice System Improvement.
- And Environmental Leadership.

Together, they reflect our commitment to collaboration, stewardship, compassion, and planning ahead for the next generation.

But a plan only matters if it leads to action.

That is why we are building implementation teams across departments to break down silos, improve coordination, and make sure county government is moving in the same direction.

Too often in government, good work can happen in separate lanes. This strategic plan is about bringing people together around shared goals, shared accountability, and measurable results.

Each pillar will include clear metrics and performance measures so residents can see the progress we are making and where we still need to do better.

We will use data, collaboration, and regular evaluation to guide decisions, strengthen services, and make sure we are delivering results for the people of Dane County.

I hope you'll take one of the handouts on your way out today.

This is the Executive Summary to this strategic plan, and we will have the full plan available on the County website.

## **Closing**

Dane County is at a pivotal moment.

We are growing rapidly. We are facing real challenges. And we are being called on to meet this moment with urgency, compassion, and vision.

But as I look across this room and this county, I am filled with optimism.

Because I see communities that care deeply about one another.

I see public servants who show up every day committed to making people's lives better.

And I see residents who believe that when we work together, there is no challenge too big for us to tackle.

That is the Dane County way. It is about moving forward together.

And it is about making sure every person in Dane County has the opportunity to live with dignity, safety, and hope.

Thank you for being here today.

Thank you for believing in this community.

And thank you for being part of building the future of Dane County together.