



COUNTY OF KENOSHA

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News Release

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Text of 2023 budget address by County Executive Samantha Kerkman

Good evening, Chairman Nudo, Vice Chair Decker, members of the County Board, elected officials, and fellow citizens of Kenosha County.

What an honor it is to be here tonight to present you with my first budget as County Executive!

I'd like to take a moment to reflect on what brought me here — to speak before this distinguished board, in this beautiful County Board Chambers, in this position as your County Executive.

Some of you know me well; with others, we're still getting to know each other.

I'm a native of this great county, and I was called to serve the public from a very young age... when my dad, Mark Starzyk, was a member of this board. I grew up around public servants, and I always admired the work they put into representing people and addressing the needs of our community.

While still in college at UW-Whitewater, I had the privilege of interning for state Representative Cloyd Porter, and I eventually became a member of his legislative staff. When Cloyd retired, I had the honor of succeeding him in the Assembly, where I would spend the next 21-plus years working for the people of our region.

During my years as a state representative, I devoted my efforts to providing responsive, empathetic constituent service... while also keeping a watchful eye on the functions of state government. I did that as the co-chair of the Legislative Audit Committee, where our work led to meaningful changes, rooting out fraud and waste and working toward greater efficiency in government.

Now I'm here as your County Executive... and my priorities remain the same. I'd like to think I brought the skills I honed in the state Capitol back to Kenosha County, and now I'm joining with you to put them to work in this budget that I'm proud to present to you tonight.

My initial months as County Executive have been about building partnerships.

- Partnerships with local government — our municipalities, first responders, and with our county employees... the list goes on.

Working together is how we get things done in Kenosha County. And working in partnership with you, we will adopt a budget that:

- Provides the services the people of our county need,
- moves us forward as the gateway to Wisconsin,
- and uses our taxpayer resources wisely.

Working together — as a county, and with partners like the Kenosha Area Business Alliance — is how we got to be a triple-A county. And I'm proud to say we continued that momentum with Standard and Poors' renewal of that bond rating this past August.

This continued rating is a seal of approval, of the strong financial positioning of the County.

I know Supervisor Geertsen understands that. As the county's Finance Director for many years, he was one of the chief architects that got us to a triple-A rating. And now we are so lucky to have him serving as a member of this board. Let's give a hand to Dave and all of the members of the board and the finance team who have worked to keep us at triple-A!

One of the reasons we've maintained a triple-A rating is that we continue to be a magnet for economic development in the region, and the nation.

For the second year in a row, Kenosha County had the highest net new construction in the state, with 2022 even surpassing 2021. And we had the state's second highest job growth for the five year period of 2016-21, at 8.8 percent. (The state average was MINUS 1 percent.)

The groundbreaking and ribbon-cuttings keep coming, as do the companies that have decided Kenosha County is where they want to move or expand their operations.

Vonco Products is a great example of this boom. This dynamic company — a manufacturer of specialized packaging solutions for all sorts of industries — became the first tenant in the Salem Business Park when it moved up here from Illinois in 2016. Five years later, it was ready to grow, and ground was broken on a 36,000-square foot addition last fall. The company's president, Keith Smith, hosted us at Vonco for a recent Council of Governments meeting that some of you attended, and he tells me they couldn't be happier to be in Kenosha County.

In Pleasant Prairie, Kroger cut the ribbon this summer on the state-of-the-art fulfillment center that is supplying its home delivery grocery service throughout the region — one of about a dozen such facilities currently up and running or planned throughout the country. That project was

achieved with some help from the state and the county, which worked in partnership to expand Highway H to accommodate the constant flow of trucks in and out of the facility.

And of course there's Haribo — the sweet addition to our corporate landscape that has been in the works for several years, and is almost done with construction. That's an example of Kenosha County as a worldwide player for economic development.

All of these developments will pay off for the entire county in the long run. They're bringing employees and potential residents to Kenosha County, and they're contributing to our tax base. The Village of Pleasant Prairie is seeing the long-term fruits of these efforts, with the upcoming retirement of one of its tax incremental finance districts. With that, their success will benefit all taxpayers in Kenosha County.

The Council of Governments — which I mentioned a moment ago — is a great example of a partnership, bringing people in our county together. We had a great conversation a few weeks back, with representatives of state and county government and nearly all of our municipalities, in a room together, listening and learning about issues that affect all of us.

One of the speakers at the meeting was Sgt. Chris Hannah, our new director of Emergency Management. Working in partnership with the Sheriff's Department, we brought Chris into that position a few months back following Captain Staples' promotion. Chris is somebody who knows the role, knows our county, and will be an asset in times of emergency — times when partnerships carry us through to recovery.

In this budget, we're partnering with the City of Kenosha in the ongoing redevelopment of the Uptown area, as the community continues to heal from the wounds that we suffered in August 2020. This budget contributes \$350,000 to an effort that will bring businesses and residents back to the struggling areas in the heart of the city.

This budget also continues our effort to move the county's Human Services building into the center of the communities that we serve... replacing an outdated facility through an innovative, public-private partnership. Thanks to this board for recently approving the acceptance of a nearly \$10 million grant from the State of Wisconsin. With that, the project is on track for construction to begin in 2023, with the goal of opening in spring 2024.

All the while, we're going to continue taking Human Services out into the community, meeting the people where they are with life-saving services and resources. The county's Behavioral Health Manager, Kari Foss, and her team have started something great and truly useful with Human Services on the Go, and we will work to continue that momentum in 2023 and beyond.

Earlier, I mentioned our county employees among our many partners. And while there is still work to be done on the class and comp study, the consultant is telling us that our benchmark jobs are — on average — below market value. Therefore, as a first step toward remaining competitive,

we are budgeting for a 3% increase to our wage schedule and a 1% across-the-board increase for employees at the first of the year.

This gives all of our hard-working employees something additional right away... helps us be competitive in hiring... and gives more earning potential to our employees who are currently at the top of their pay grade. We have also included some reclassifications of jobs that we know need immediate attention — like nursing assistants, environmental services workers, admission and release specialists, and social workers. We have included another half a million dollars to address final recommendations that come out of the study in the months ahead.

This budget retains a commitment to maintaining and improving our infrastructure where needed — continuing to embark on projects that support economic development and quality of life.

The Pike River South Branch restoration, a project that the previous County Board supported in the 2022 budget, is moving forward in this budget — although it may see some tweaks. I am committed to addressing the ecological issues that cause chronic flooding in that corridor on the City of Kenosha's west side and in Somers — issues that affect the health of the entire Pike River system.

This budget includes road projects aimed at enhancing safety — such as the construction of a roundabout at highways A and Y in Somers, and reconstruction of Highway EM in Twin Lakes. I know Supervisor Karow and his constituents will benefit from that.

We're continuing the program of keeping up with maintaining our county highways — 15 miles of paving is in this budget.

And we're continuing an effort to attract private support for the restoration of the beautiful, historic Ceremonial Courtroom. This is a project that will only happen through the power of partnerships — and I was so pleased with last week's announcement of a \$100,000 donation from Habush, Habush & Rottier. That generous contribution gets us further down the road toward seeing the restoration come to fruition, and it is hopefully the start of more support to come.

We're doing all of these projects while keeping a close eye on our long-term obligations.

This budget reduces our borrowing by \$6.3 million compared to last year. We're working to be good fiscal stewards, reviewing the projects that have been in the CIP, still doing what we need to do. We've taken advantage of low interest rates in the past, but now we're in a more uncertain inflationary environment, and care will be taken to keep our obligations under control.

Last but certainly not least, this budget makes a commitment to veterans in our county.

The Kenosha County Veterans Memorial Park — if you haven't been there, you really must see it — has become a wonderful destination to honor our veterans, and it continues to blossom. As we speak, construction continues on permanent restrooms near the Veterans Honor Plaza that opened last year. And work has begun on the first of six memorial shelters to be built over the coming years, honoring those who have served in each of the branches of the military.

But one thing that we've found with the park as it's taken shape, is that visitors don't always know how to get to their destination. There's the original park entrance off Highway KD, with a road that takes you to the breathtaking lake and several miles of hiking trails. And there's the new entrance off Highway F that leads to the Veterans Honor Plaza.

This budget bestows fitting names upon those roads.

When Cloyd Porter was in the Legislature, he worked hard to secure state support — roughly \$300,000 — for the county's purchase of the old gravel pit that would become the original part of the park. And so it is my honor to pay tribute to his efforts with the naming of the Highway KD entrance and road as the "Porter Parkway."

And I'm sure many of you from the area know that the western portion of the park, where the Honor Plaza is now located, was once land owned by Powers Lake Construction. (I know you know that, Supervisor Karow) And as such, language in this budget resolution designates the Highway F entrance and road as Karow Court! It is my pleasure to designate these names, that I trust will remain well-known for future generations.

When I think about partnerships, I think about a group of veterans in the community who came to me after the Kenosha County Veterans Memorial Park was dedicated, and talked about the many veterans landmarks that are dotted across our county — including some that are perhaps more well-known than others.

I had an idea, which I'm proud to introduce to you tonight. Today, we launched the Kenosha County Veterans Honor Portal — and online, one-stop shop for veteran-related information in our county.

One of the features in the portal comes from my conversation with those residents... the Kenosha County Veterans Tribute Trail is a map-based application that takes users on a self-guided tour of veterans landmarks throughout the county. VFW and American Legion posts, war memorials, notable veteran graves... and more... it's all there, on a map that you can follow in your car or on your easy chair at home. I believe this is a wonderful resource for our residents and visitors, alike.

Another feature of the portal that's very exciting is the Veterans Honor Registry — a place for veterans, or their families, or survivors of veterans from long ago, to contribute to a living history of veterans in our county. An online form, accessible from the portal, allows people to

enter information about veterans with Kenosha County ties. That information is vetted by our Veterans Service Office staff and then published onto a public-facing site that we hope will grow for years to come.

Kudos to Veterans Services Director Ali Nelson, Land Information Director Scott Schutze, and the whole team that made this vision come to life! And there will be more features to come in the months ahead...

In conclusion, this budget meets the needs of our county, it moves us forward, and it does so fiscally responsibly.

I look forward to working in partnership with you — the County Board — to make it happen.

May God bless you, may God bless America, and may God bless Kenosha County. Thank you.

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