



# COUNTY OF KENOSHA

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News Release

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Text of 2023 State of the County address by County Executive Samantha Kerkman**

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

A little more than a year ago it was my honor to be sworn in as your County Executive. Tonight, it is my privilege to come before you with my first State of the County address.

What a year it has been!

Last year at this time, many of us were still in the early stages of getting to know one another. This board gained eight new faces. (Well, they weren't all "new" — I'm looking at you, Supervisor Geertsen and Supervisor Poole.) And I was the first new occupant of the County Executive's Office in 14 years.

Together, with the veteran supervisors who remained on the board, we had a lot of listening and learning to do.

In one year, we've come a long way! That the state of our county remains strong!

I'd like to highlight some of our many "firsts" we've accomplished together. I'm proud of these programs because all of them are about reaching out and lifting others up. For instance:

- We held our first-ever Budget Vision Session together last month — so that each and every one of you could make your priorities known early in the upcoming budget process.
- We retooled and brought together the Kenosha County Opioid Settlement Panel. Their job is to make recommendations on how to best use the settlement funds. We are determined to use these dollars effectively and efficiently as we continue our battle against the overdose crisis in our community.

- We started the Broadband Advisory Committee to tell us how to attract further investment to improve broadband internet service in Kenosha County's underserved areas.
- We put together a roundtable of village leaders from across the county and hosted the first-ever Bi-County Council of Governments meeting jointly with officials from Racine County.
- We brought together law enforcement leaders from across Kenosha County for a summit in my office to discuss public safety.
- We launched the Kenosha County Veterans Honor Portal, an online tool that provides easy access to information for veterans and others in the community — and will have a new Veterans History section, just in time for Memorial Day.
- I became the first county executive in many years to keep a satellite office at the County Center in Bristol. I am available to meet with constituents who would prefer to travel there instead of here.
- I've made constituent outreach a priority, with the Saturdays in the Park with Sam during the warmer months and Cocoa & Coffee with Kerkman office hours during the cold months. Many of you joined me to share a cup of coffee and conversation.
- And it's not just me showing up around the county to talk with you and get to know your needs. We are taking county government to the Kenosha County Fair. Department and division teams joined myself and Deputy Friendly and others from the Sheriff's Department. I look forward to an even larger presence this August.

We already made some headway with our employee recruitment and retention challenges because of this board. The adjustments you made as part of the 2023 budget. CNA positions at Brookside — which have been so hard to fill in recent years — are now mostly filled, and Brookside is tracking toward being back in the black later this year.

And, working with the newly elected Sheriff, we've made solid progress in filling the correctional officer positions that have been extremely challenging to keep staffed in recent years.

More recently, you moved us significantly further along in maintaining and improving Kenosha County's status as an employer of choice — with your approval of the recommendations of the class and comp study, which will take effect on July first. That was a major investment — one we all agree is necessary for us to retain and attract a high-quality and skilled workforce.

I mentioned the Opioid Settlement Panel earlier, and one of the group's first recommendations will be coming before you this month.

We will be asking the board to approve a budget modification to add a Prevention Specialist Educator position, which will work with schools across the county to develop programming around substance abuse and prevention. The team of experts on the Panel have determined this is a high-priority use of a small amount of the settlement dollars, and I'm confident there will be more well-researched recommendations coming from that group. I encourage you to support it.

We are looking to partner with some of our neighbors in areas where working together would benefit all of us.

Earlier this year, Vice Chair Decker and Supervisors Gaschke and Nedweski joined Sheriff Zoerner and myself when we signed a landmark agreement with Lake Behavioral Hospital in Waukegan. This was more than six years in the making and, thanks to persistence all around, we can now send some Chapter 51 mental health patients just a half hour away, rather than three hours.

This saves us money, and it benefits the patients by keeping them closer to home. Sheriff Zoerner and I recently had the opportunity to tour the facility and meet staff, and we look forward to this new partnership getting off the ground in the very near future.

This is an example of the good that can come from working together with external partners. Looking ahead, we're talking with Racine County about other potential opportunities to join together for health and public safety.

And, lastly, we're working on a partnership with the state and Racine County on a road swap that makes sense for all involved. Under this proposed agreement, the state will keep jurisdiction of Highway KR permanently, and we will take state Highway 75 in Kenosha County. This would save the county roughly \$300,000 in maintenance costs each year.

As part of the budget closeout resolution that you approved last month, we will be funding a position that had sat vacant for several years. The Assistant Human Services Director will work with John Jansen on the oversight of the many complex functions of Human Services. And this will help us continue our focus on succession planning.

John is a busy guy these days as we continue our work on a major project. I am pleased to report planning for the new Human Services Building on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street is on track, construction activity will begin very soon, and the aim is to have the building open by the end of 2024.

Our future is bright in Kenosha County, and our economy is strong.

Earlier today, I was at an event that symbolized our recent success. HARIBO held a sneak peek event at its Pleasant Prairie production plant — a project that we've all enjoyed watching take shape along I-94 and is now in operation. Built with future expansion in mind, the facility is now geared up to employ about 400 people — a truly sweet addition to our local economy. And it's a recognition of Kenosha County's standing as a location of choice for employers from all over the world.

Also along the I-94 corridor, Uline seems to never stop growing. The city recently approved plans for a 1.4-million-square-foot distribution facility on its campus at Highway 142, across from Amazon. It's part of an additional 5 million square feet of space they plan to add over the next five years.

There are other business developments that have happened recently, or are coming soon.

Last year, Rehrig Pacific — the makers of the trash and recycling bins that many of us have at our homes — added nearly 50,000 square feet to its longtime manufacturing plant in Pleasant Prairie.

Puratos Chocolate USA added a new production line to its plant in the Kenosha Industrial Park earlier this year... bringing on new employees and giving the company the ability to produce 6 million pounds of chocolate each year.

And LMI Packaging in Pleasant Prairie recently announced plans for a 49,000-square-foot addition to its 71,000-square-foot facility and plans to grow its workforce from roughly 200 employees today, to up upward of 400.

Within county government, our finances remain very sound, as reflected by our Triple-A rating with S&P.

In 2022, we learned people love to shop in Kenosha County! We once again broke the record for sales tax collections, at more than \$20 million.

Our estimated Unassigned General Fund balance is also at its highest level in the county's history, at more than \$22 million as of Dec. 31. This reserve figure represents nearly 34 percent of total general fund expenditures, which is also a record high.

Looking forward, as the state budget process plays out, we're collaborating with our partners at the state level on shared revenue opportunities that might improve our financial situation even further.

Earlier, I talked about taking county government to the County Fair, and about my office at the KCC. Whether you live on the east end or the west end of the county, my goal is for you to not feel far apart. For you to feel closer than you did a year ago. We've made efforts to bridge the I-94 divide that's separated our county for so long.

We've brought West-of-the-I representation to the Joint Services Board, so that the entire county has an eye on the agency that supports public safety efforts.

We've brought people from across the county together for productive conversations about issues that affect all of us, no matter where we live.

And, of course, we don't always all agree on everything. And that's OK, because — at the end of the day — we're all here with the same goal in mind: To serve the people of Kenosha County, and to ensure your county government is working for you.

All of us, together, are... #TeamKenoshaCounty.

And that's not just a catchy slogan. I sincerely believe it's true.

Everybody on our team has a unique role — from the legislators who cast their votes in this room, to our department and division heads and their talented teams, to the crews out on our highways, plowing the snow and paving the roads.

Thanks to #TeamKenoshaCounty, the state of Kenosha County is strong, and the future is bright!

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

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