



State of the County Address
July 18, 2017

The State of our County is the State of our Workforce, the human capital to run the engine of our economy and community.

When I was elected to this office in April of 2010, our unemployment rate in Portage County was 8.4%. As the Great Recession has fallen further behind us, our unemployment rate is at a 17-year low, with Portage County at 2.6% in May. We are virtually at full employment which means we are competing for workers like never before in our recent history. Those communities that attract and retain workers are those that thrive.

When we consider workforce shortage projections from the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, we anticipate a North Central Region shortage of 60,000 workers by 2022 (Lincoln, Oneida, Vilas, Forest, Langlade, Marathon, Portage, Wood, and Adams Counties). Portage County alone is projected to see a shortage of some 16,000 workers by 2025 due to business growth, retirements, and just not enough people to fill available jobs. Doing everything we can to make our community attractive to retain a workforce across ages and fields of expertise is critical to community success. That means we need to adapt to the preferences of Baby Boomers (many of whom continue to work in retirement), Generation X (born 1965-1984), Generation Y (otherwise known as Millennials born in the early 1980's), and Centennials (those under 18 years of age).

According to the Central Wisconsin Economic Research Bureau at UW-Stevens Point in its *Economic Indicators Report First Quarter 2017: Central Wisconsin* by Drs. Jerome Segura III and Scott Wallace, Portage County seems to be holding its own: The Report reads, "Portage County stands out with the strongest population growth rate, well in excess of the state and regional averages. Moreover, it appears Portage County has outperformed the other counties in the Central Wisconsin region by large margins in regards to both attraction and retention." (p. 5) The Report also notes (p. 4) that "in the post-recession period, the only county to experience net inward migration was Portage County" to the tune of nearly 2.1% population growth from 2010-2014. This is in comparison to Adams, Lincoln, Marathon, and Wood Counties—each of which lost population during that same time period.

In a recent conversation with a tenured county government leader in our region, he said that he wished that his community had what we have here in Portage County to attract and retain people.

What are workers of all demographics preferring in their communities? According to *Investing in Place*, a report on a poll of Baby Boomers and Millennials by the American Planning Association in 2014, these two groups are interested in some similar things: congestion-free green spaces, outdoor places to exercise, water in which to swim, safe streets, and healthy communities. They are also looking for more walkable communities and a variety of transportation options. They want alternate living options so that their parents may live with them if needed and they want to age in place. Millennials want more work-life balance, so having easy access to adventures and trying new things is important to them. Generation X generally grew up as latch key kids so it makes sense that they want access to parks, thriving downtowns, safe neighborhoods, and they want strong community connections. Technology access, of course, is important for all groups.

Considering these general preferences, how does Portage County stack up?

Quite well, I'm happy to say! Some of the reasons spur from our traditional community values and geographic location while other aspects of our community competitiveness lie in more recent initiatives.

Let's take a closer look at initiatives in which Portage County government has been involved:

With over 100 lakes and over 115 miles of streams, it is no wonder that Portage County is known for its stellar county parks and trails. Our first County Park, Lake Emily, was established in 1900 (well before there ever was a Park Commission) by visionaries who recognized the value of setting aside resources for the future. In 2016, Portage County did just that as we partnered with a family of landowners and our state to purchase an ecologically outstanding 270-acre property in the Town of Sharon known as *Steinhaugen*. This new County Park is now open to serve silent sports enthusiasts and to preserve natural resources for our future. Portage County's core values are conservation values—strong environmental values related to our lands and waters. Those who desire more sustainable communities—like Millennials do—find plentiful opportunities here to recreate and enjoy down-to-earth connections.

Portage County's investment of \$25,000 for this year's countywide water quality study is another step in the right direction. A continuum of other programs and services provided through our County departments also support these preferences for healthier, safer communities and the quality of life we enjoy here.

As I mentioned above Millennials and Baby Boomers want more and better options for getting around—transportation options that focus around community walkability, bike routes, trails, and mass transit so they don't necessarily need a

personal vehicle. Portage County government recently approved merging our transportation resources with that of the City of Stevens Point. Beginning in January 2018, there will be a single call center for transportation (like a unified transportation dispatch). The goal is improving mobility options and access countywide.

Portage County's Bike & Pedestrian Plan was adopted in 2014. It lays out a roadmap for us to continue to improve our community's walkability and enhance bike routes. For the first time in our history, the plan included our County's rural areas—not just our urban areas. With implementation of the plan, we will have another great opportunity to improve transportation and recreation options.

Access to technology is a critical recruitment and retention tool. Portage County's recent broadband project lays a foundation for ensuring the connectivity that drives our world. We contributed \$25,000 toward the launch of a broadband needs assessment in 2015. I remember advocating for that seed funding to support the Broadband Task Force led by the Town of Hull and UW-Extension with other municipal and technology stakeholders. The seed funding was meant to leverage for additional grants, some of which we have now received as we continue to improve countywide coverage.

Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials, in general, desire opportunities to be engaged in serving their communities. Portage County's core community values are well-aligned with this preference! Our annual United Way campaign is a wonderful example. Each year, our community sets a financial goal and achieves it as businesses, organizations, and individuals commit to investing in our people and our quality of life. In 2016, Portage County gave \$5,000 from the County Executive Department budget toward developing our community's LIFE Report, an important strategic plan for our community. This report also gives direction to the annual United Way fundraising campaign. It identifies top tier strategic issues and

opportunities where we can focus United Way dollars to have the greatest impact today and tomorrow without unnecessary overlap with County run programs and services. The LIFE Report is nearing completion after more than a year of work by ranks of people, including some County staff, who participated on work groups. Based on community needs assessments and other research, the LIFE Report will help us set our sights on social, community, and environmental issues that matter most—and make our community even more attractive overall.

Portage County has renewed its contract (a two-year contract) with the Portage County Business Council (PCBC) which has been at the center of collaborating with our business, not-for-profit and education communities to build workforce pipelines. Through a number of work groups spun off from our 2015 New ERA (Employee Retention Attraction) workshop held at 1039 Ellis, we are listening to young professionals and workers from all demographics to tackle issues of housing and infrastructure, education and innovation, marketing and awareness, and entertainment and recreation. These were focus areas identified as critical to community competitiveness in retaining and attracting employees.

Portage County government continues to play a key role in enhancing our creative economy, a \$61 million economic sector (Western States Arts Federation Creative Vitality Suite 2014, an economic analysis tool). The software industry here is one aspect of our creative economy. In 2015, we gave temporary space in our 1039 Ellis building to house the IDEA Center, a maker space that supports our creative economy by hosting those who are innovators, designers, entrepreneurs, and artists. It is an arm of our arts alliance now called CREATE Portage County. The IDEA Center is all about collaboration as one can see when they come in the door and see this word painted in five foot letters across a wall in the meeting area. This is an attraction/retention tool for Gen X and Millennials. Some of the IDEA Center users have moved here from more urban areas like Milwaukee and Denver to become part of our community.

Yes, we in Portage County government have played an active role in moving our County forward. Certainly, our County's investment in our employees' salary study is one of the most important recent steps taken. Now the charge is to make sure that we keep it current and competitive and that our Human Resource policies are also adjusted to roll with the changing times.

Certainly, a win for Portage County is a win for our whole Central Wisconsin Region. I'm very proud of the active role that I have played in guiding this future momentum for our County government and for our community as a whole. There is no doubt that we are headed in the right direction. Let's continue moving forward by continuing to invest in our workforce, our community, and our quality of life. It is our County's vibrancy and vibrant leadership that will see us through. ###