



COUNTY OF KENOSHA

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Text of Kenosha County Executive Jim Kreuser's 2022 State of the County address:

Good evening, Chairman O'Day, Vice Chair Yuhas, ladies and gentlemen of the County Board, elected officials, county employees, and citizens of Kenosha County.

It is my privilege to join you tonight to deliver my final State of the County Address to this distinguished board.

Since last year's address, we've lost one former member of this board. Fred Ekornaas was a career member of our Sheriff's Department who served two terms as the sheriff. Later, in his retirement, he rejoined county government, serving 10 years on the County Board. Fred was truly a dedicated public servant, known and respected for his direct talk and action.

Let's take a moment of silence for Supervisor Ekornaas.

As I stand here before you tonight, I can't help but reflect on the great work that we've done together over the last 14 years — and everything we've been able to do for the people of our great county — to move Kenosha County forward.

I came into this office in June of 2008, in what I believe we all remember to be a challenging time — to say the least — for our county and our country.

Kenosha County government was in a state of flux, with the previous county executive having left office suddenly.

There was an acute need for all of us to pull together.

And, of course, in Kenosha County and beyond, the Great Recession was here. In the summer of 2008, it would still be some months before Washington would bail out the big banks and the auto industry, and we'd see two of the Big Three automakers go bankrupt. But we were already feeling the pain locally. Foreclosures were rising. It was clear times were going to be tough for a while.

Here in county government, there was a lot of work to do. Let's talk a little bit about some of those issues that we faced:

■ There was untouched, long-deferred maintenance that needed to be done in our county buildings. If you were standing on the roof of the Courthouse, you could push the parapet off the wall and onto the sidewalk. The roof in my office had a leak that had been patched with a tarp. The foundation in this building was leaking. We had air conditioning and heating systems that were operating with hoses connected to faucets.

■ Petrifying Springs Park — the jewel of our county parks system — was crumbling and underutilized. And we had an abandoned gravel pit that was intended to be a park out on the west end with a lock on the gate and a sign that read “No Trespassing.”

■ We had a space crisis in our Public Safety Building, where 911 dispatchers were working in loud, cramped, outdated quarters and our Police and Sheriff’s Department operations were bursting at the seams.

■ Brookside Care Center was losing money — more than a million dollars in some years.

■ There were silos in our finances. The finance team downtown wasn’t always able to be on top of what was going on in Public Works and Human Services. (Working with Joe Clark, the chairman of this board at that time, helped us to resolve that problem quickly.)

■ In IT, we had antiquated systems and closets full of undeployed equipment that had sat there so long it was already obsolete.

And now look at where we are today. We have addressed all of these issues and made so many more improvements that will serve the people of Kenosha County in many cases for generations to come.

Together, we, along with previous County Boards, moved the needle — heck, we broke the needle of measurement in many areas that could and in many cases should stand the test of time:

■ The Courthouse and this building have undergone the restorations needed to ensure their future for generations.

■ We expanded the Public Safety Building to bring 911 dispatch out of their cramped quarters, providing the space and quiet environment needed to ensure that when someone is in an emergency, the call will be answered and the dispatcher will be able to listen and send the needed help.

■ And we planned for the future, creating the space in the Safety Building that now houses IT, our state-of-the art Emergency Operations Center, and the Sheriff’s Detective Bureau.

■ We also bought up relatively inexpensive properties around the Civic Center campus as they became available, giving the County Seat room to grow where it’s seated, in downtown Kenosha.

■ We gave new life to Petrifying Springs and all of our parks. We got people back into the parks, and wore out the grass — which I think many of you know has always been my goal with our parks. Bringing people back to our parks and improving facilities begat things like:

- Disc golf and pickleball at Fox River Park
 - Bike trails and walking trails across the county
 - Yoga and Fitness in the Park classes
 - Oktoberfest at Old Settlers Park in Paddock Lake and at Kemper Center
 - The Petrifying Springs Biergarten
 - And Boundless Adventures at Bristol Woods Park
- We took that locked-up gravel pit on Highway KD and eventually transformed it into the Kenosha County Veterans Memorial Park. What a success story! It's beautiful now, and more enhancements are to come. Thank you for your support of honoring those that have served and are now serving, and those who will serve us and to protect and defend us every day.
- Brookside is no longer losing money. In fact, it's returned dollars to the tax levy year after year and it's been modernized for the future with an expansion and the addition of Willowbrook Assisted Living. I think we all agree that these facilities are one of our county's greatest assets, providing a high-quality, compassionate, continuum of care to our residents — and Newsweek magazine agrees, too. You may have heard that it ranked Brookside as Wisconsin's top nursing home in 2021.
- In IT, we brought in experts and did a total revamping and now we have had savings because of the investments we made. Greater productivity, easier access to services for our residents, and quick pivots to remote work for many of our employees in recent times of crisis. These are all things made possible by our skilled team in IT.
- The silos in our finances have been torn down, and today we are a triple-A county!
- Let's give a hand to our finance team, and to all of you for supporting many or all of the measures we've taken to ensure our fiscal success.
 - AAA was another one of those goals that we had for a long time. And now we're there — one of just seven counties out of the 72 in the state.
 - This rating has already paid dividends for our taxpayers. Just since last August, we've saved \$300,000 in borrowing costs for major projects.

How did we get to triple-A? Here are just a few highlights of what we've accomplished in finance:

- Our general fund balance is currently at its highest level in history — up 143% since 2008 — ensuring liquidity to provide for county obligations.
- The equalized value of our county is also the highest it's ever been — up over 64% in the last eight years.
- Our general-purpose levy has increased an average of 2.4% since 2008 — materially below the rate of inflation.
- Since 2008, the county's general fund has reduced its dependency of funding, by the tax levy — from 73% then, to 68% now.
- And our mill rate has reduced for eight consecutive years; it's now equal to the rate from 10 years ago.
- In the last four years, the county taxes per \$100,000 of value of a home have decreased by \$4.25.

- For new construction, Kenosha County ranked third highest in Wisconsin in 2020.
- And even with all of those big, generational projects that I mentioned earlier, our total long-term obligations are \$25 million lower compared to 2008.

Over the years, we've made strategic, significant investments in our infrastructure, and those investments have paid off.

You've probably heard me say, "Infrastructure leads to economic development, which leads to jobs." And it's true — Kenosha County's job growth from 2015 to 2020 was 11.1% — the highest in Wisconsin.

What did we do to improve our infrastructure?

I'll name just a few of our many accomplishments:

- Right away back in 2008, we worked with the City of Kenosha and the state to expand and improve Highway N — what's now known as 38th Street east of the I — and turned it over to the city, so that Gordon Food Service could bring its facility to Kenosha County. That was our first big economic development win during those challenging economic times. Little did we know then that Amazon would soon build out one and a half million square feet next door to the north.
- We expanded 30th Avenue from St. Peters to 15th Street, expanded it to four lanes and turned it over to the city, too.
- We expanded Highway K, 60th Street, to four lanes out past Indian Trail. And there's more work to come on that this year, expanding it to 94th Court — with two more phases in the works, ending at 128th Avenue.
- We reconfigured Highway F in Randall and Twin Lakes, straightening out dangerous curves and improving intersection sightlines.
- With help from the State of Wisconsin, we reconstructed and expanded a portion of Highway H with turn lanes to make way for the new Kroger fulfillment center in Pleasant Prairie.
- And we completed the largest county trunk highway project in our history: Highway S, from 31 to the Interstate. Thanks to support from the federal and state governments — and this board's support — that's now a beautiful, safe, four-lane divided gateway in and out of the Village of Somers and the City of Kenosha's northwest side. (And there's a bike trail that'll get you all the way out to Mars Cheese Castle.)
- Along the way, while we've done these projects, we haven't lost track of maintaining all of our county trunk highways in every corner of Kenosha County. Since 2008, we've repaved nearly 80% of the 253 total miles of roadway under county jurisdiction. Think about that — *80 percent of our county roads have received a new surface of pavement in just the last 14 years.* When you hear people complain about potholes, they're not often talking about county roads, are they?

When it comes to economic development, infrastructure isn't only about roads and bridges. It's also providing the incentives that we need to offer to compete with other communities, and we've done that through the county's support of the High Impact Fund with KABA, which has generated more than 1,500 new jobs and nearly \$300 million in new private investment.

As the recession played itself out, Kenosha County began to rack up more and more economic development wins — thanks not only to our prime location, but to the forward-thinking actions and investments of county government and this board.

In 2010, the last vestige of automaking left us when Chrysler's bankruptcy led to the closing of the Kenosha Engine Plant. But at the same time, Uline was arriving with its significant corporate headquarters in Pleasant Prairie, and we've only seen that company continue to grow its footprint in Kenosha County.

Many other significant economic developments followed, and I can't help but feel bright about our future.

I must say that while it was my privilege to serve as your county executive during this period of great change and rebirth as a community, this was far from a one-man show. It's been the people over my many years of service who have shared with me their thoughts, ideas and concerns who have truly made a difference. And some of those great ideas have come to fruition in a major way.

Looking ahead, we still have some big projects ahead of us that this County Board has supported, and that I hope future board and the future administration continue to support:

- The relocation of our Human Services functions from the Job Center to a new, centrally located, state-of-the-art facility on 52nd Street is something that received unanimous support from this board last November, and that is good — it is clearly the right thing to do.
- Staying on top of our roads, as we have for the last 14 years remains imperative, and it is my hope that the new board and administration continue this progressive pavement program.
- Bringing broadband access to areas that remain underserved — going to work and school from home during the pandemic underscored the importance of this, and the county has a role to play in ensuring that providers have the incentive to reach these low-density population areas.
- Protecting our eroding lakefront on the Kemper Center grounds, seeking outside funding and making the necessary investment to preserve that historic property for future generations.
- And restoring our historic Ceremonial Courtroom to its former grandeur, making it a gathering space for reflection and education about the law. An interested group is actively working to raise private funds to make that project a reality, and I urge the future County Board to support those efforts.

- Completing the first phase of the South Branch Pike River restoration and moving ahead with future phases — seeing through the largest initiative for ecological restoration in Kenosha County’s history, and one that will improve our quality of life for generations to come.
- At the same time, completing phase 3 of the Pike River restoration in Petrifying Springs Park — another project that’s already improved our quality of life, and our environment.
- Supporting the mission of the Racial and Ethnic Equity Commission.

As you all know, Kenosha County over the last two years has been putting an increased emphasis on the pursuit of racial equity. This board supported the creation of the Racial and Equity Commission, and a resolution declaring racism as a public health crisis in Kenosha County.

Jennie Tunkieicz, my chief of staff, has said recently that our ongoing work in this area is among the things she’s proudest of accomplishing during our 14 years in this office. And Jennie herself — as the first woman to hold her position, breaking gender barriers throughout her career — is a true ally in the advancement of racial and gender equity in Kenosha County government.

And so it is my pleasure tonight to announce the establishment of an award in her honor — the Jennie Tunkieicz Award — to be presented annually going forward to a person who has made a significant impact on equity, diversity and inclusion in Kenosha County government.

And I’m pleased to announce that the inaugural recipient of this award will be Adelene Greene, who has done so much to advance equity in our county and our community for so many years. Along with Jennie and Adelene, I look forward to this award becoming an annual tradition.

There’s more that’s still on your plate. Including:

- Continuing the momentum of enhancing the Kenosha County Veterans Memorial Park, making sure that we work toward building out the amenities that our veterans workgroup recommended.
- The reconstruction of County Trunk EM in Twin Lakes, which will address a serious public safety situation
- And retaining the AAA bond rating that Kenosha County worked so hard to earn.

We’ve done so many great things together over the last 14 years, and it’s my hope that you will all continue to pull together for the good of the county — setting aside partisan politics — working in the best interests, of the most people, for the long haul.

Our transition started today, and I can tell you that County Executive- Elect Kerkman is off to a terrific start! Welcome, County Executive-Elect Kerkman!

You can let political polarization get in the way of getting things done. Or you can work together, like we have been able to do:

- To continue advancing innovation and best practices in county government, delivering the services people need in the most efficient ways possible.
- To maintain and further enhance our position as THE hotspot for economic development in Wisconsin, the Midwest, and the United States.
- To make Kenosha County an even better place to live, work, play, and raise a family.

As someone who loves this county, who cares deeply about it and always will, it is my sincere hope that you choose to continue to move Kenosha County forward.

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

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