

RICHLAND COUNTY

Referendum Ad Hoc Committee

September 26, 2022

NOTICE OF MEETING

Please be advised that the Richland County Referendum Ad Hoc Committee will convene at 6:30 p.m., Tuesday, September 27th, 2022 in the County Board Room at 181 W. Seminary Street and via videoconference and teleconference using the following information:

WebEx Videoconference:

<https://richlandcounty.my.webex.com/richlandcounty.my/j.php?MTID=m3b551deea54c67abd4388c427e042056>

Meeting number: 2558 083 2910 , Password: 3Nmm6kYB2Cj

WebEx Teleconference: WebEx teleconference phone number: 650-479-3208, Access code: 2558 083 2910

If you have any trouble accessing the meeting, please contact MIS Director Barbara Scott at 608-649-5922 (phone) or barbara.scott@co.richland.wi.us (email), or Referendum Ad Hoc Committee Chair Shaun Murphy-Lopez at 608-462-3715 (phone/text) or shaun.murphy@co.richland.wi.us (email).

Agenda:

1. Call to order
2. Proof of notification
3. Agenda approval
4. Public comments

Topics raised in comments received from the public may be placed on a future agenda for consideration.
5. Approval of minutes
6. Public education information report*
 - a. Wage comparisons with peer counties
 - b. Staffing level comparisons with peer counties
 - c. Other updates
7. Responses from the public to press release and social media posts*
8. Report on presentation at Richland County Towns Association meeting*
9. Research on other referendums*
10. Correspondence with other committees*
11. Presentations at Richland Center City Council and School Boards*
12. Future agenda items
13. Adjournment

*Meeting materials for items marked with an asterisk may be found at

<https://administrator.co.richland.wi.us/minutes/referendum-ad-hoc-committee/>.

CC: Committee Members, County Board, Department Heads, Richland Observer, WRCO, Valley Sentinel, Courthouse Bulletin Board

A quorum may be present from other Committees, Boards, or Commissions. No committee, board or commission will exercise any responsibilities, authority or duties except for the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee.

Richland County Referendum Ad Hoc Committee

Agenda Item Cover

Agenda Item Name: Public education information report

Department	County Board	Presented By:	Shaun Murphy-Lopez
Date of Meeting:	9/27/22	Action Needed:	Motion
Disclosure:	Open Session	Authority:	Resolution 22-74
Date submitted:	9/27/22	Referred by:	Motion at 9/7/22 meeting

Recommendation and/or action language: Motion to adopt an updated public education information report to use in communicating with the public, committees, boards, agencies, and other bodies, and refer staffing comparison information to the HHS & Veterans Standing Committee for use at their upcoming 9/29/22 meeting.

Background: At the September 7th meeting of the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee, the committee adopted a public education information report. Attached is an updated version for the committee's consideration, as well as a version with tracked changes.

Staffing comparisons have revealed that the Richland County Health & Human Services Department may be overstaffed when compared to the peer counties of Bayfield, Burnett, and Kewaunee. This information is recommended for referral to the HHS & Veterans Standing Committee to inform their efforts to reduce the property tax levy allocated to the Health & Human Services Department.

Attachments and References:

06A Public Education 092722	06B Public Education 092722 Tracked Changes
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Financial Review:

(please check one)

<input type="checkbox"/>	In adopted budget	Fund Number	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Apportionment needed	Requested Fund Number	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other funding Source		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No financial impact		

Approval:

Review:

Department Head

Administrator, or Elected Office (if applicable)

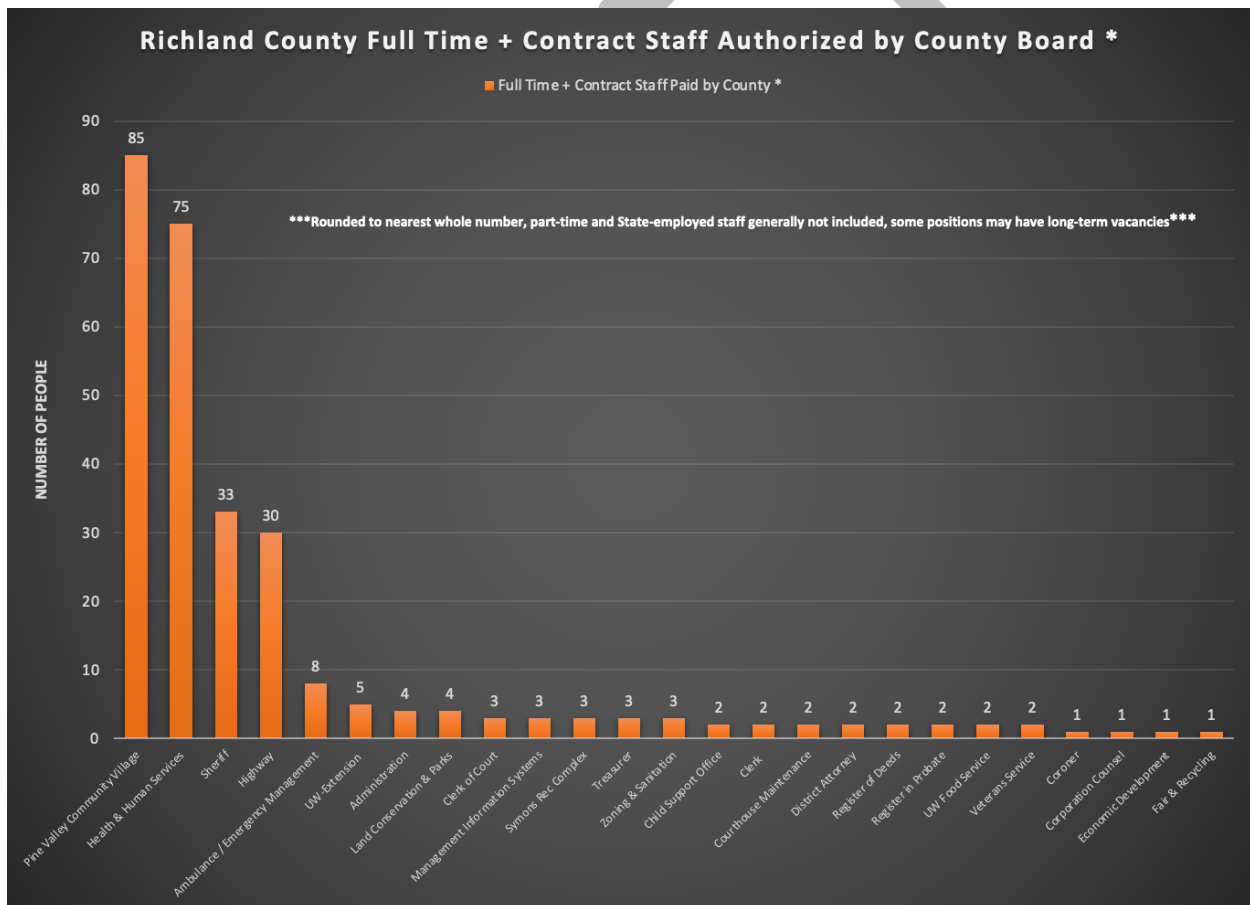
Educational Information for Use by the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee

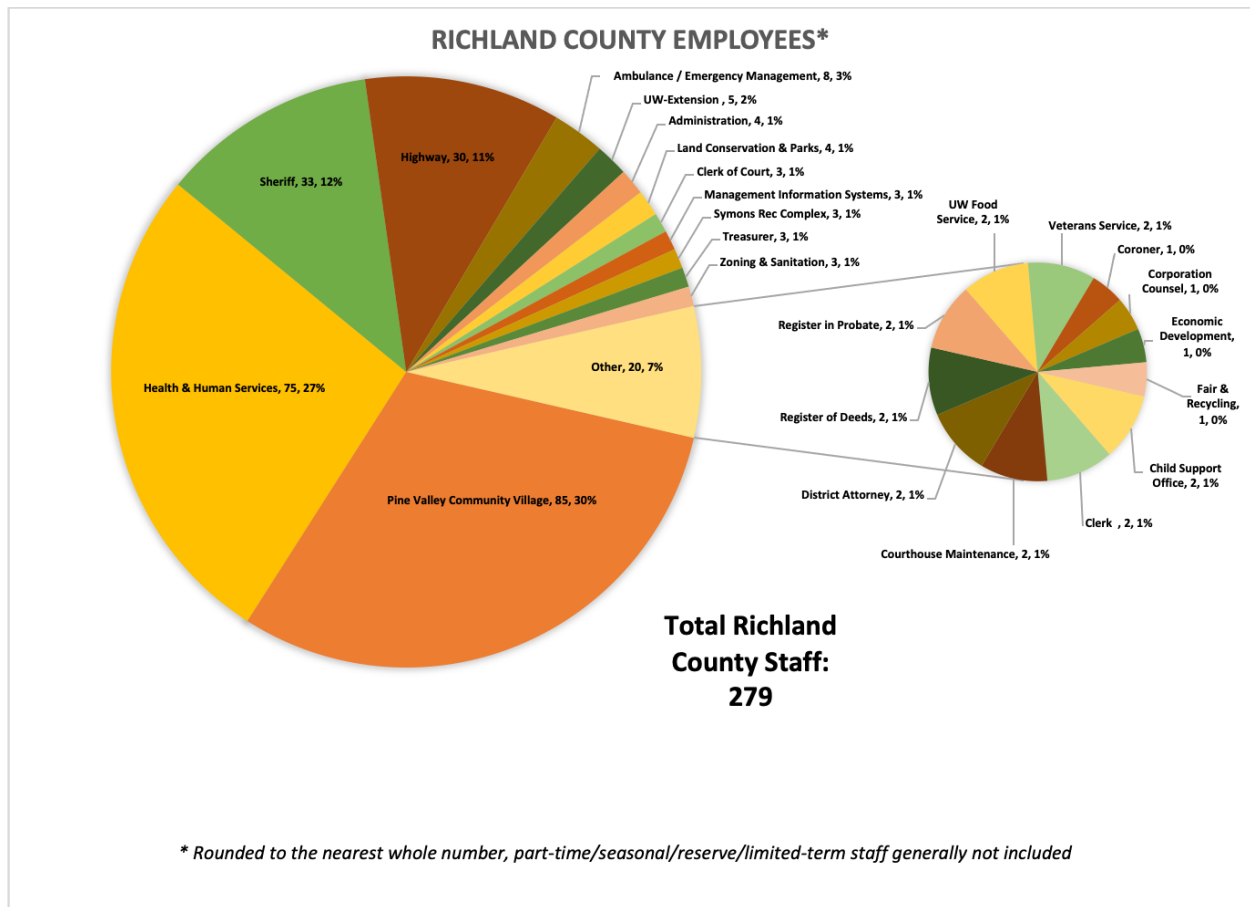
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1. To serve as the basis for educational materials to be developed by the Committee so the public can better understand our mission
2. To be used as a tool for communication with County departments/committees, as well as other government agencies and their representatives

Introduction

The Richland County Referendum Ad Hoc Committee is *considering the idea of a referendum* so the voters can decide if the County's operating levy should be increased to maintain current staffing levels and services. **Staffing levels currently look like this:**





The County has a total budget of \$36 million in the current 2022 calendar year. **The budget is balanced, meaning \$36 million in expenses matches \$36 million in revenues.**

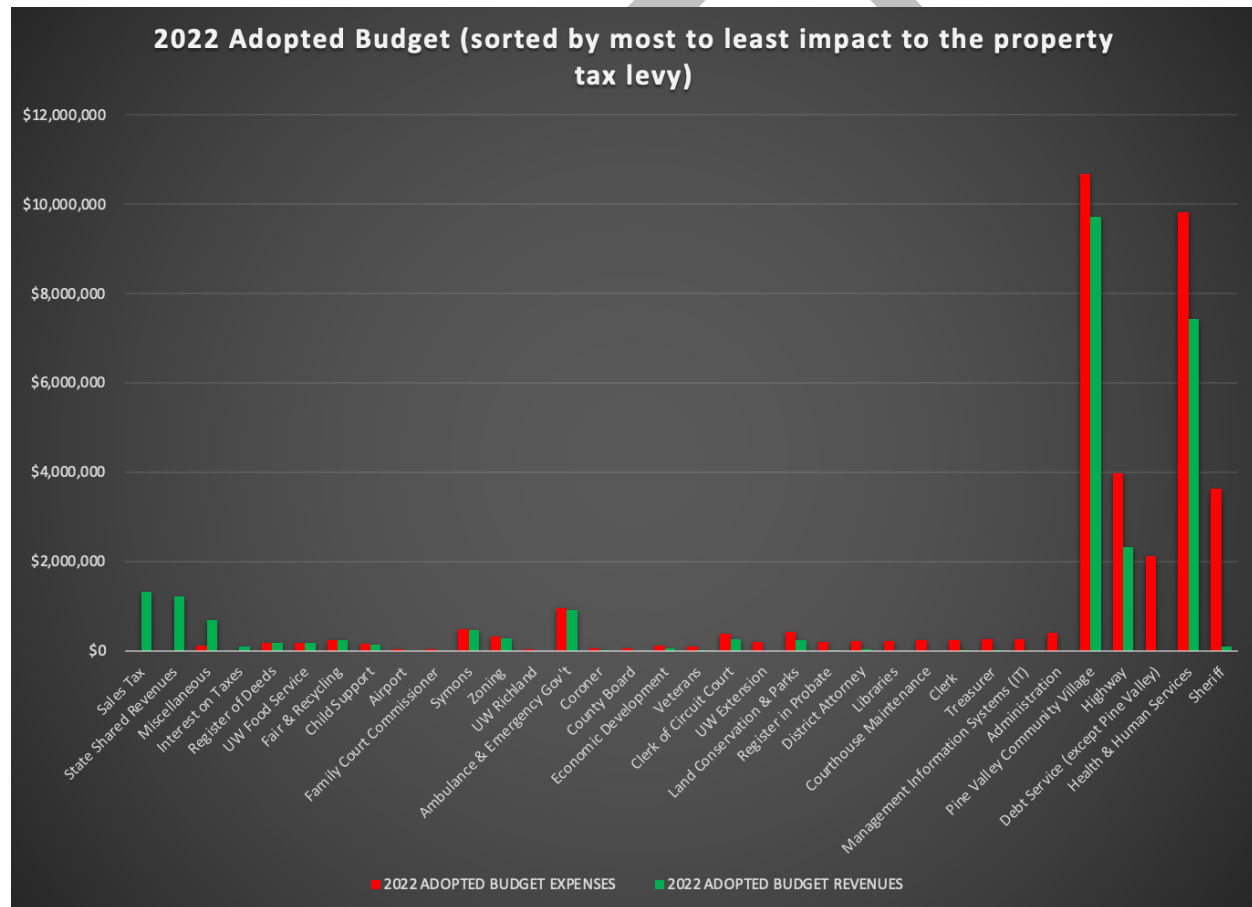
Revenues vs. Expenses

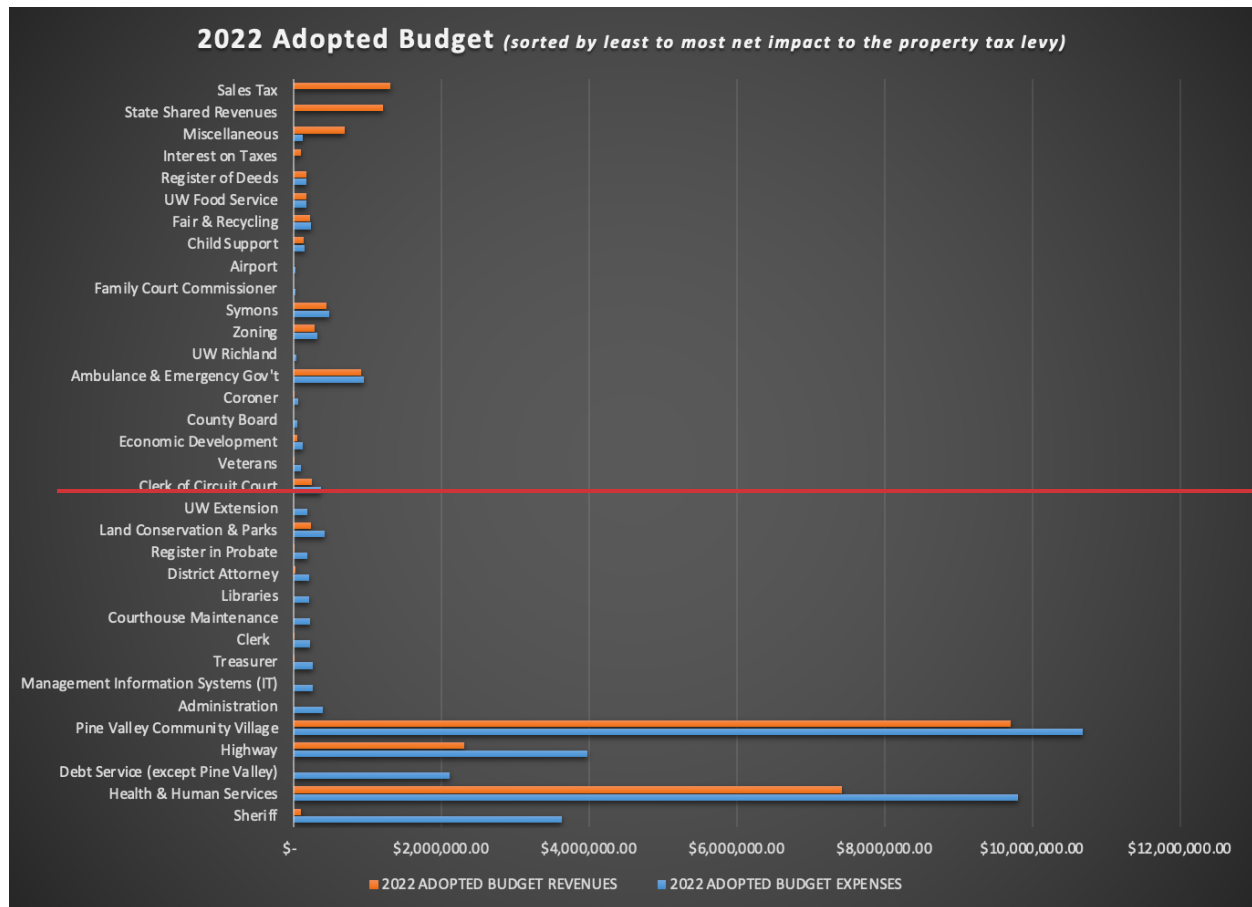
Most County budget revenues come from other governments, typically at the federal and state levels. Some departments bring in significant amounts of revenue to offset County expenses. For example,

- The **federal government** pays for patient care at **Pine Valley Community Village**
- The **federal and state governments** pay for programming in the **Health & Human Services Department** (i.e., mental health, economic support, aging and disability resources, child protection, public health)
- The **state government** pays the **Highway Department** to maintain state-owned highways (e.g., US Highway 14, Wisconsin Highway 60)

Some of these outside revenues are reliant on matching monies from Richland County.

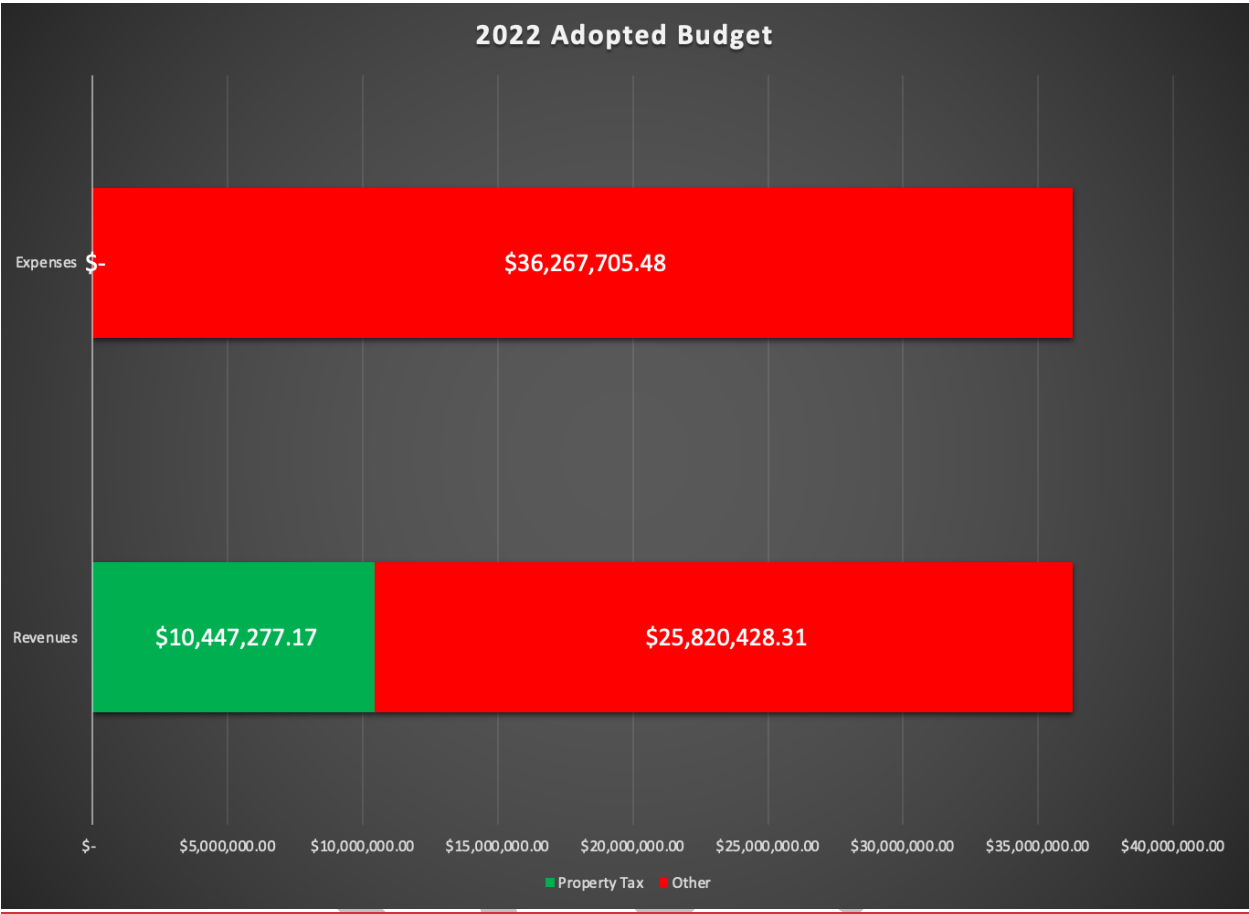
Meanwhile, other departments don't have the ability to bring in very much revenue. **The expenses and revenues of all departments currently look like this:**

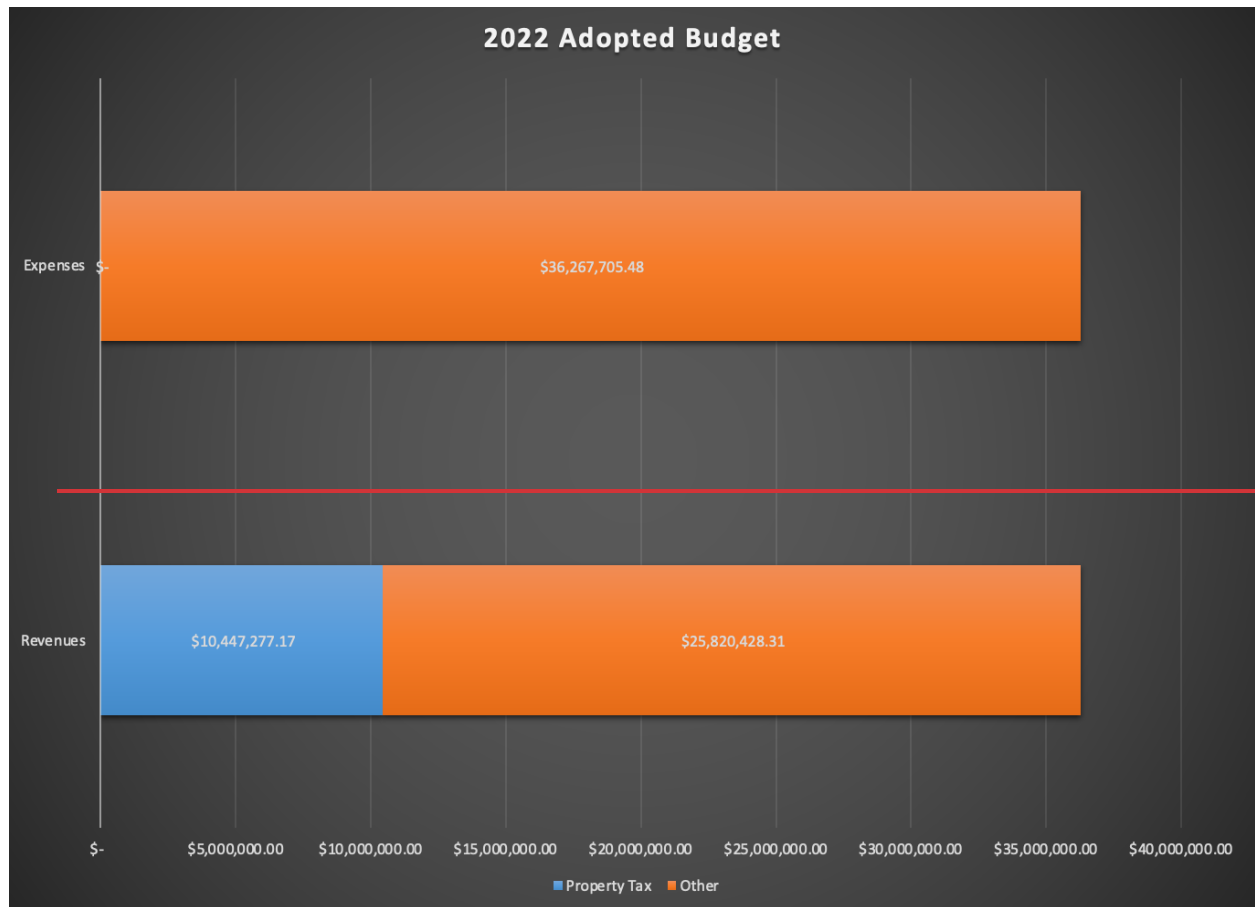




The Property Tax

How does the County make up the difference in revenues and expenses for each department? **We levy a property tax**, as shown here:



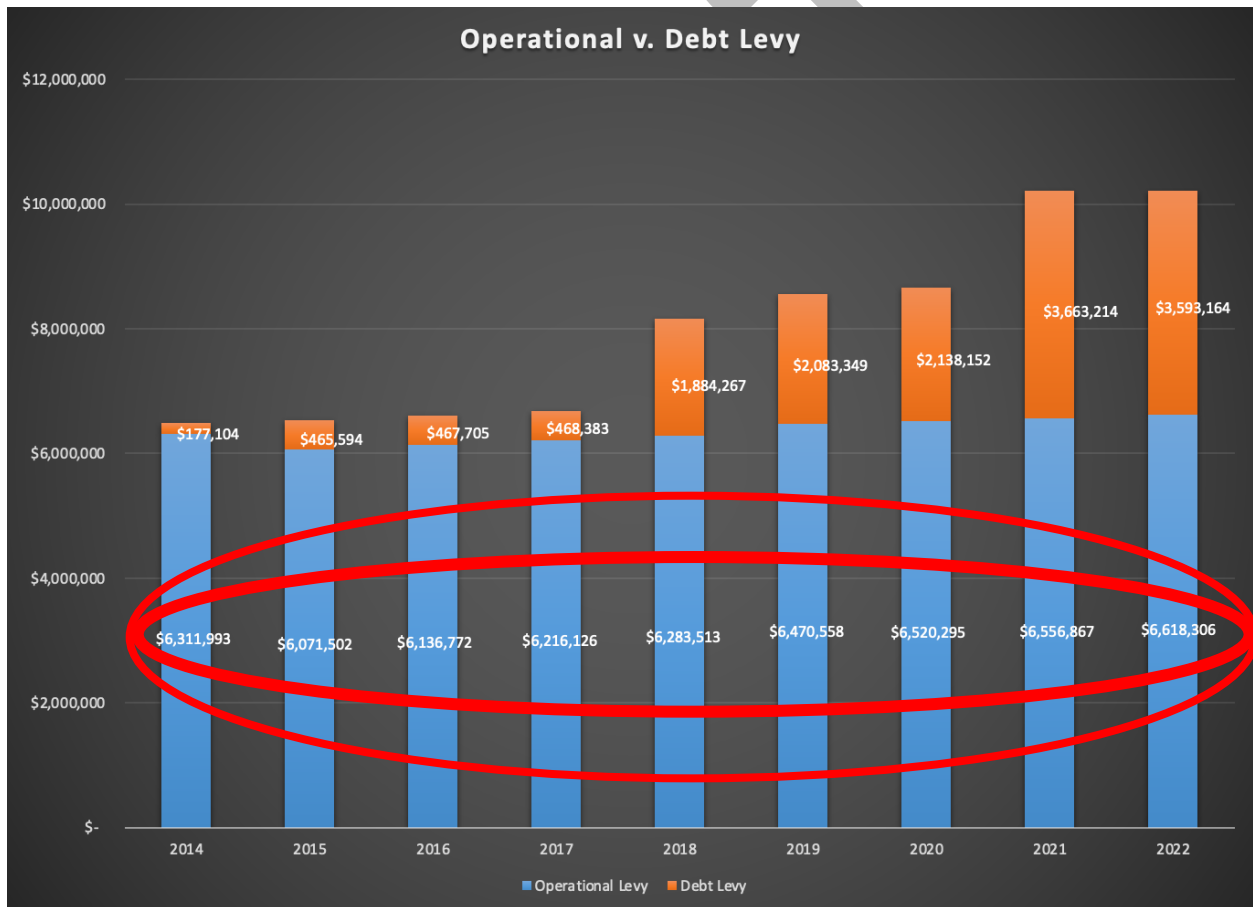


The property tax levy is divided into 2 parts: **operating and debt**. We do this because the State of Wisconsin has different laws about how the County can levy property taxes for each part:

1. The first law says the County **cannot raise the operating levy at a rate faster than net new construction**.¹ According to the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the State implemented an earlier version of this law in 2006 because property taxes were rising as state shared revenue declined.²
2. The second law says the County **can raise the debt levy at the rate it chooses**, as long as the total outstanding debt stays below 5% of the value of all property in the County.

Over the past 8 years, **the operating levy has stayed relatively flat, while the debt levy has risen at a faster pace** to pay for the new building at Pine Valley Community Village (between 2017 and 2018) and highway/building maintenance needs (between 2020 and 2021).

The County's Referendum Ad Hoc Committee is looking at the possibility of asking the voters to approve a more substantial increase to the operating levy (circled in red below):



¹ <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/66/vi/0602>

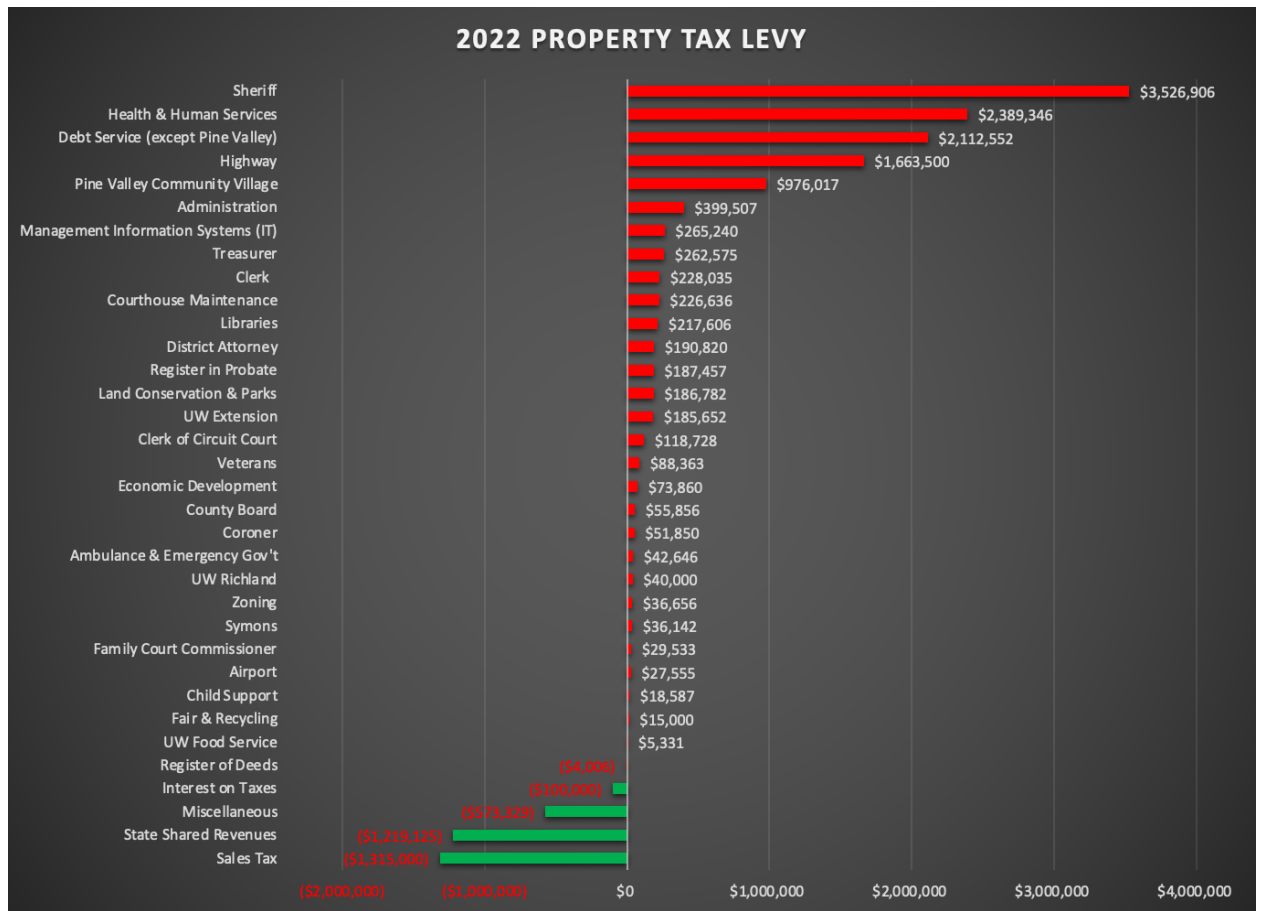
² https://wispolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/13_04-Local-Gov-Finances.pdf

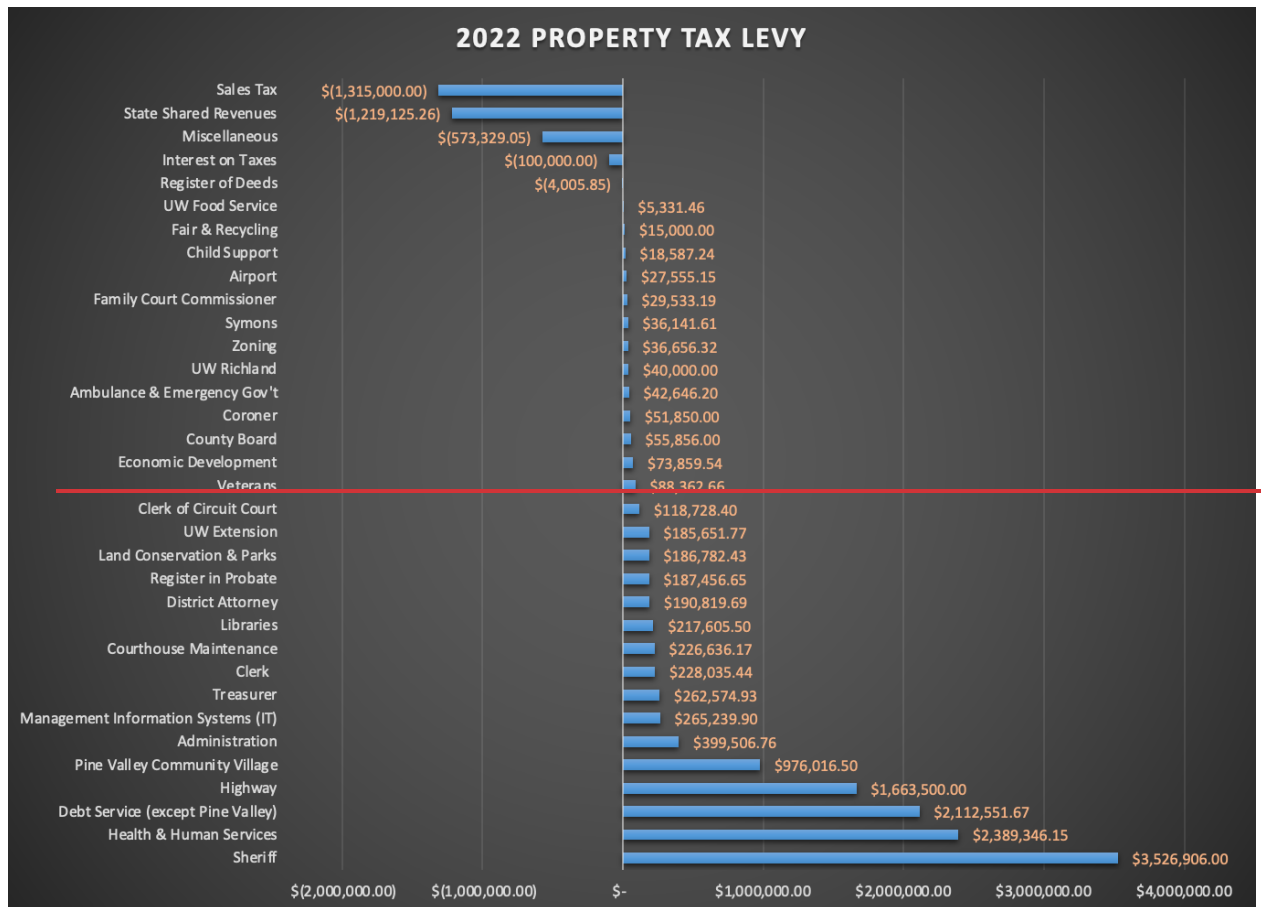


Departments Relying on the Property Tax

Which departments benefit most from property taxes? If federal and state revenues, as well as fees for services (such as those collected by the Ambulance, Clerk of Court, Register of Deeds, Symons, UW Food Service, and Zoning Department) are set aside, the **following 4 departments use the most property tax** (as shown in the chart below):

1. Sheriff
2. Health & Human Services
3. Highway
4. Pine Valley Community Village



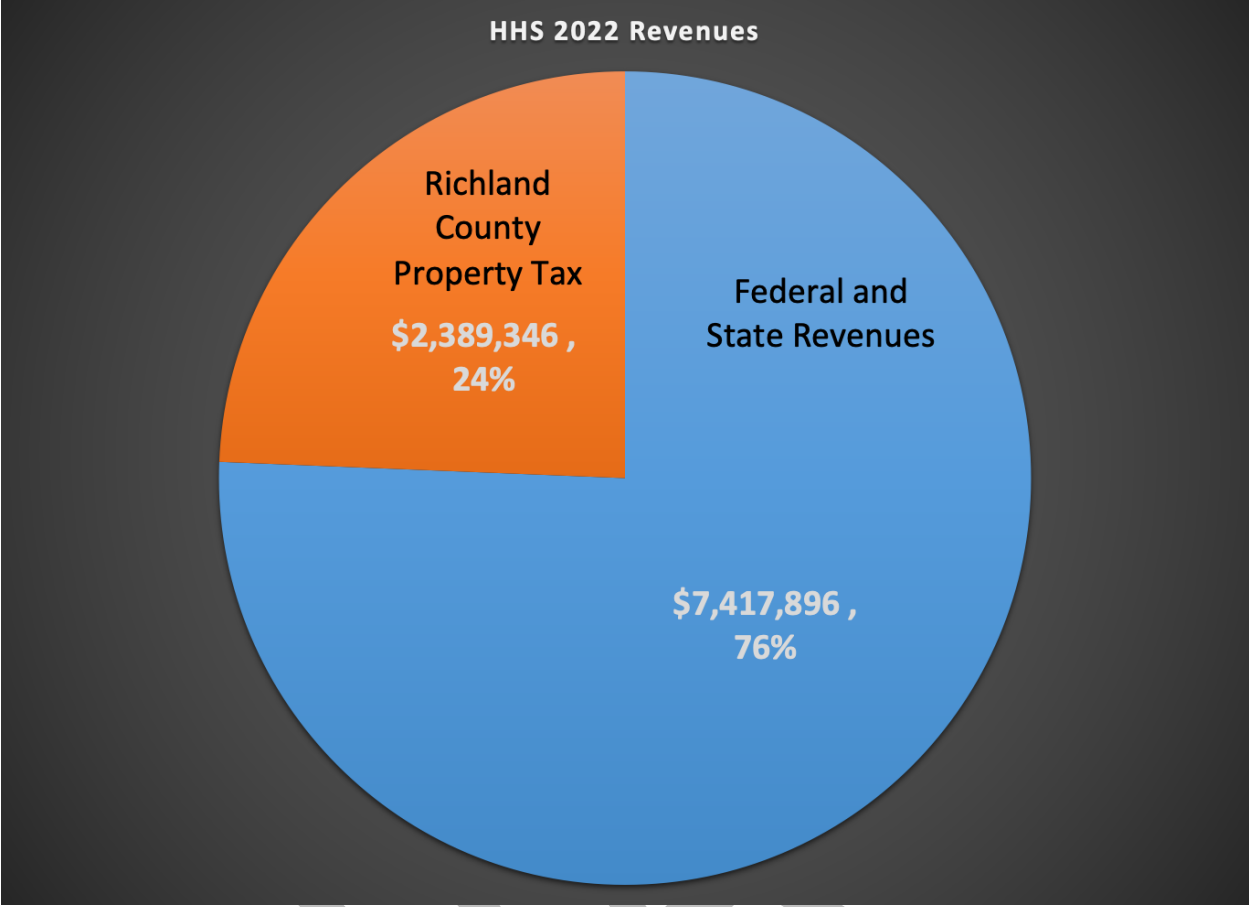


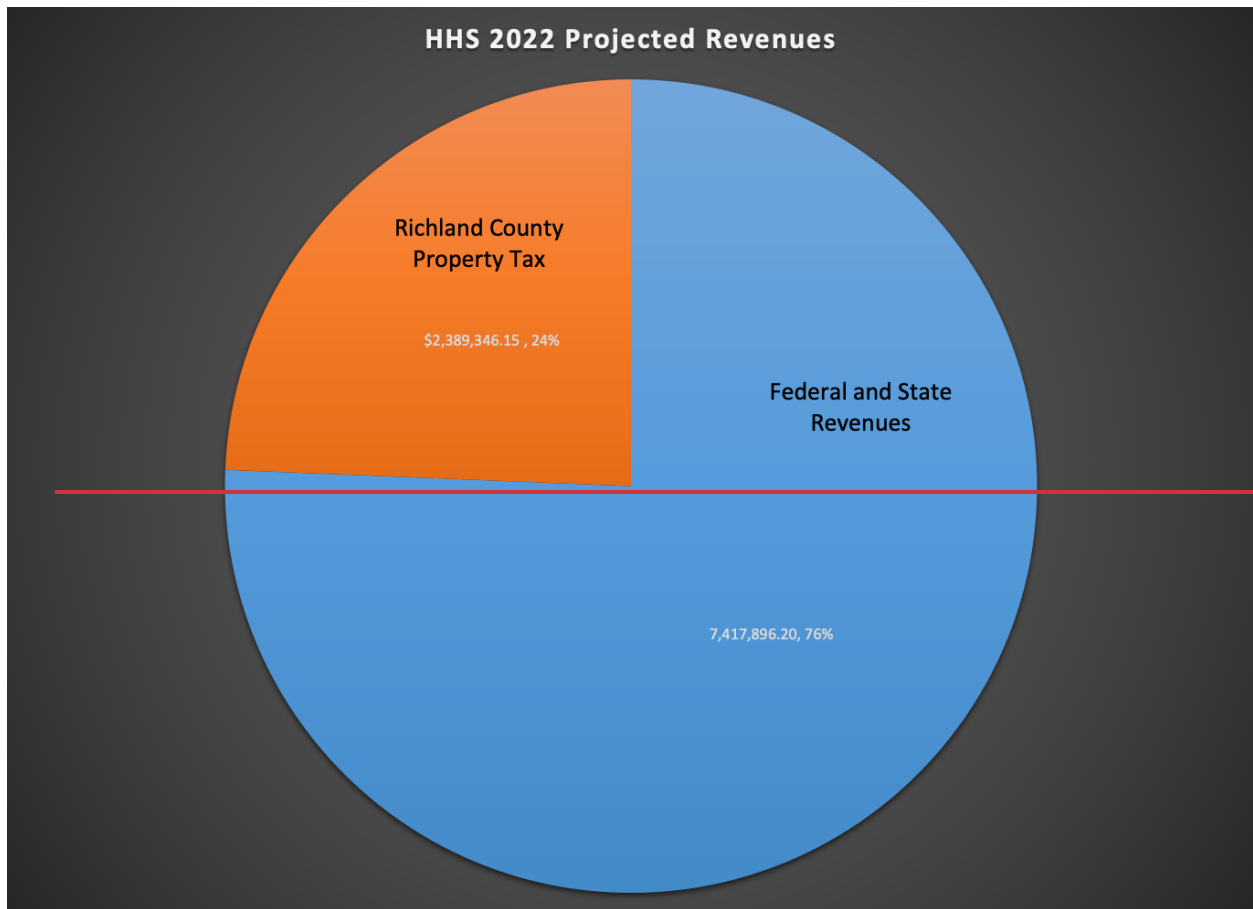
Next, we'll look at three categories that often have associated misconceptions: 1) Health & Human Services, 2) Pine Valley Community Village, and 3) State Shared Revenue.

Category #1: Health & Human Services

As shown in previous charts, the Health & Human Services (HHS) Department has the 2nd highest number of employees out of any department at the County. At the same time, this department uses less property tax revenue than the Sheriff's Department (\$2.4 million for HHS vs. \$3.5 million for Sheriff). Why is this?

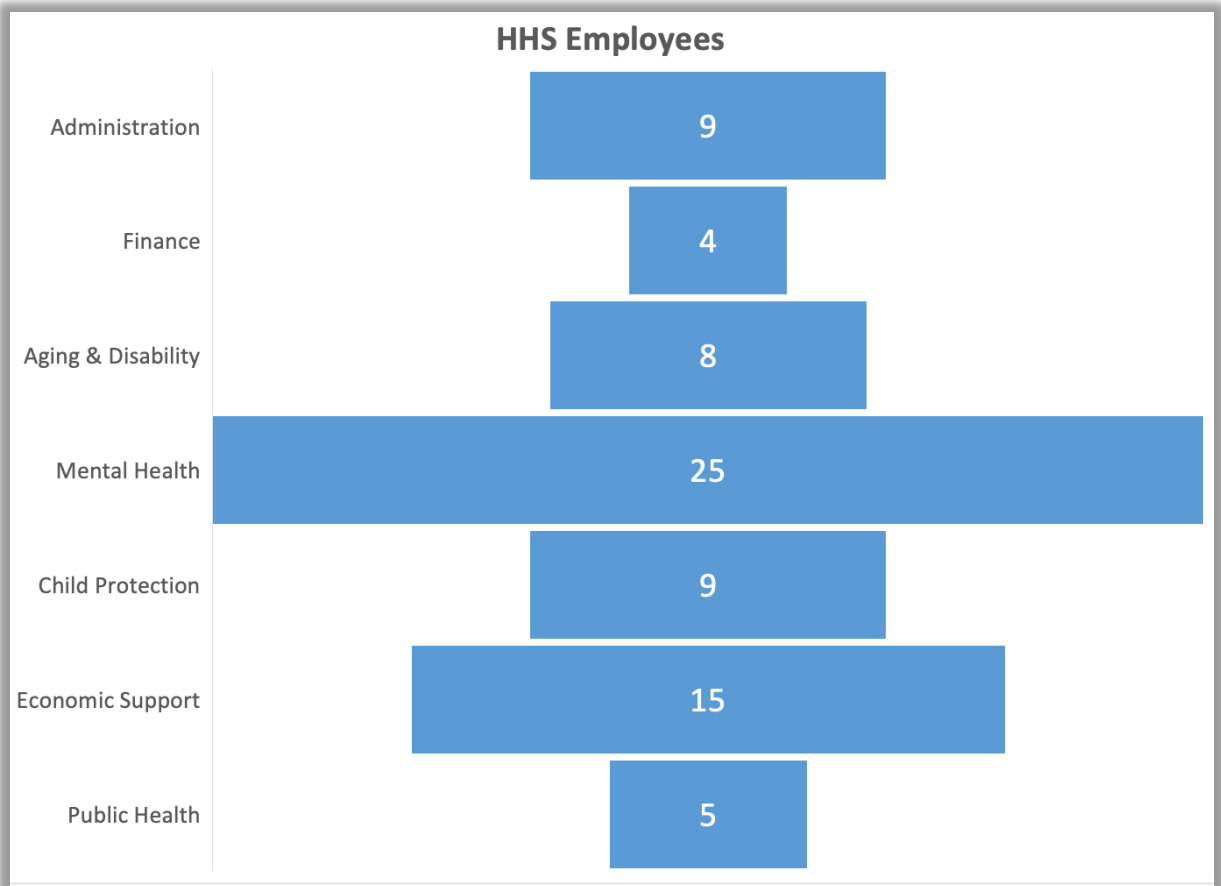
It's because **HHS brings in a lot of revenue from the federal and state governments.**





If the County reduced its property tax revenue contribution to HHS, some of these federal and state revenues would be lost.

People also often think HHS is primarily a welfare agency. **While economic support is important, it's one of only 5 main areas of service to residents.** More employees are dedicated to mental health services than economic support, as shown in this chart:



Note: Over the coming months, the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee will be working with the Health & Human Services and Veterans Standing Committee to better understand how federal and state funding is tied to employee positions.

Category #2: Pine Valley Community Village

It is often said that Pine Valley Community Village:

1. Makes a profit for the County

2. Doesn't pay its debt

Which is true?

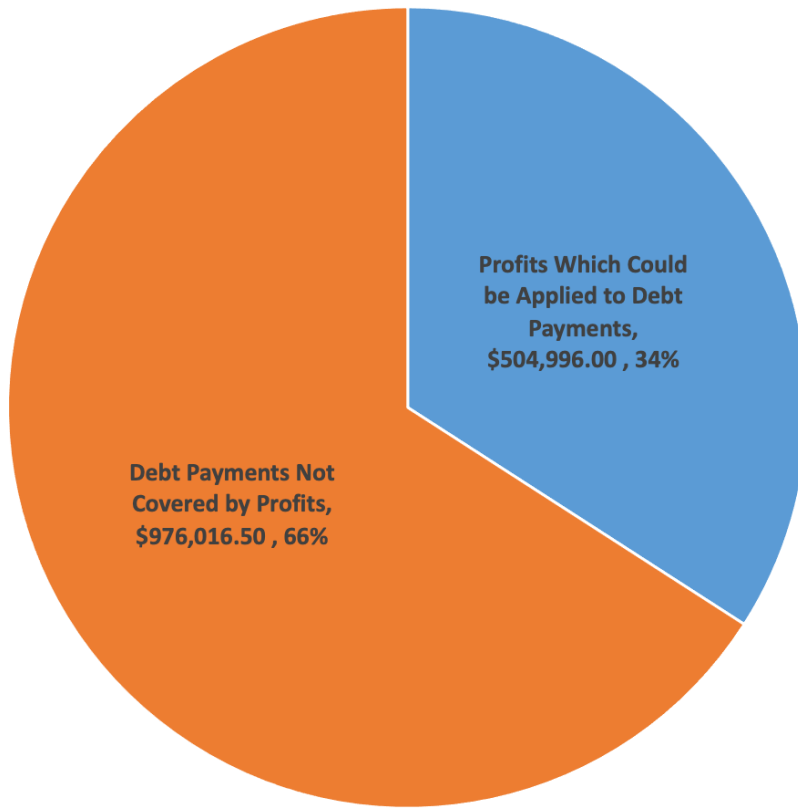
There is some truth to both statements, but neither is totally accurate. Because of the state laws referred to earlier, the County keeps track of Pine Valley's budget in two categories – operating and debt:



Statement #1 would be more accurate if it said, **“Pine Valley makes an operating profit for the County.”**

In recent years, the operating profit from Pine Valley has been applied to offset the operating expenses of other departments at the County. **If that operating profit was instead applied to debt payments, it would cover one-third of annual debt payments**, as shown in the following chart:

Pine Valley Community Village 2022 Budget



So, statement #2 would be more accurate if it said, **“Pine Valley’s operating profits could cover one-third of its debt payments, if those profits were not used by the County Board to offset the operating expenses of other County departments.”**

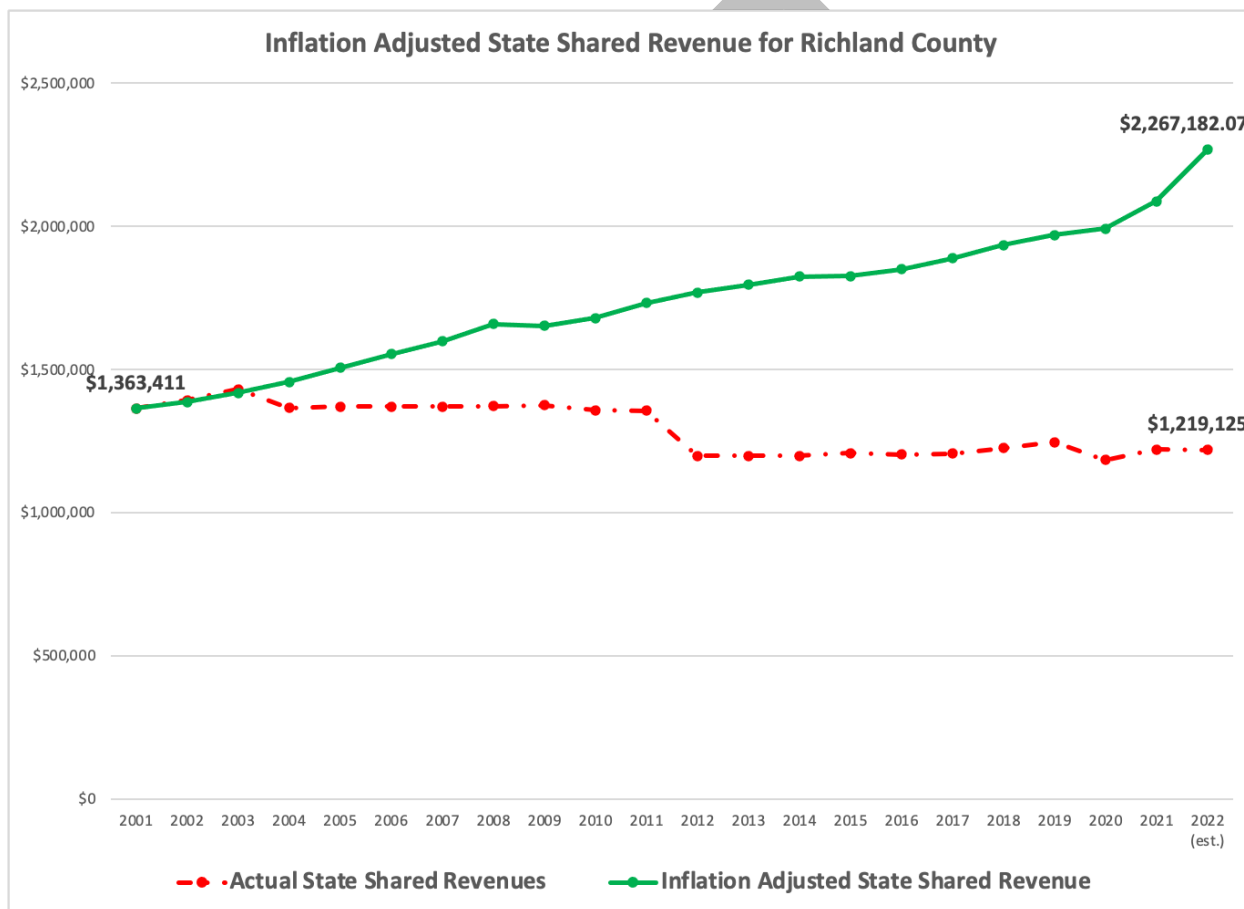
Note: Over the coming months, the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee will be working with the Pine Valley & Child Support Standing Committee to better understand if operating profits can be increased to cover 50% of its debt payments.

Category #3: State Shared Revenue

State shared revenue comes from the State of Wisconsin. **Every local government agency in Wisconsin receives this revenue.**

Shared revenue was originally put in place in the early 1900's to share state income tax revenue with local governments in exchange for a reduction in property that could be taxed³. In the 1970's, shared revenues were begun to be used to level the playing field between communities with lower income tax revenues and wealthier parts of the state.⁴

In 2001, Richland County received \$1.36 million that could be spent on general government activities such as public safety, human services, and highways. **In 2021, the State shared \$1.22 million, a drop of 12%.** If the amount received in 2001 was adjusted for inflation⁵, the amount would be \$2.27 million.



Why is shared revenue from the State declining? According to a Wisconsin Policy Forum report from 2013, the following state spending priorities shifted after 1995⁶:

- More focus on school aid

³

https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/informational_papers/january_2017/0018_shared_revenue_program_informational_paper_18.pdf

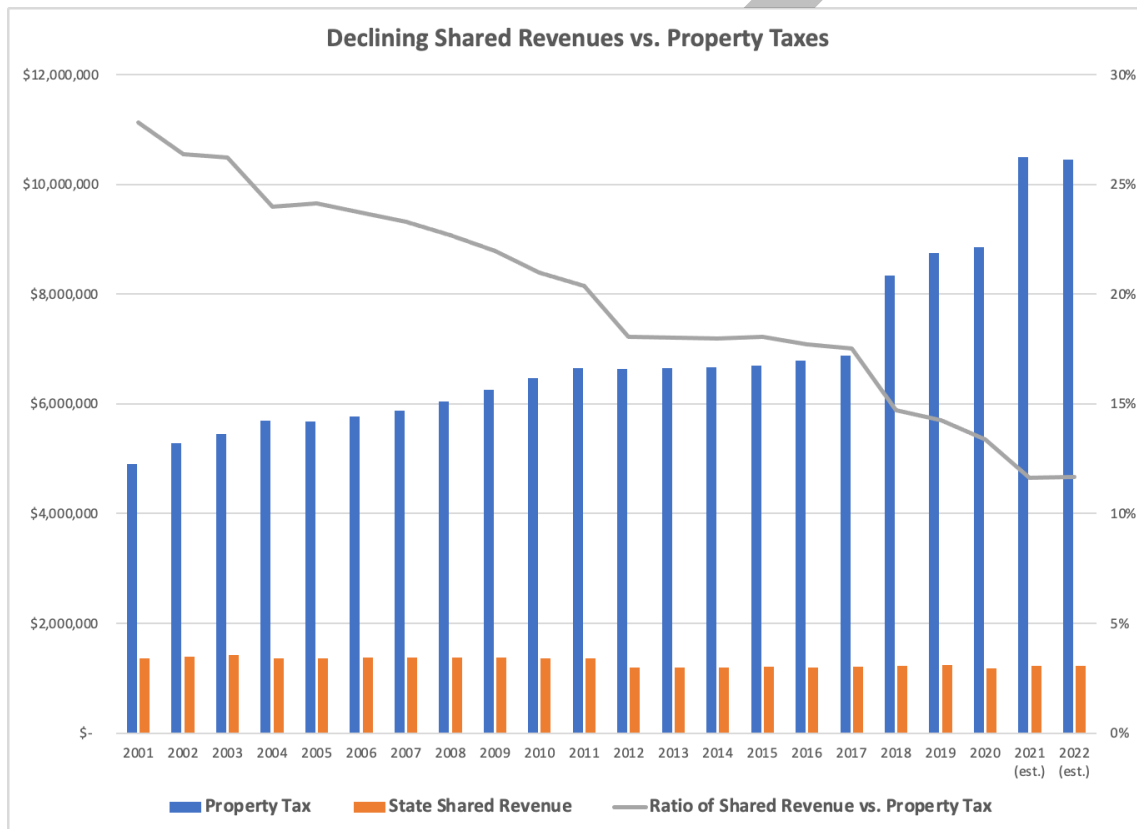
⁴ <https://lwm-info.org/DocumentCenter/View/5904/8-22-The-Municipality-State-Local-Partnership>

⁵ <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/about-us/monetary-policy/inflation-calculator/consumer-price-index-1913->

⁶ https://wispolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/13_04-Local-Gov-Finances.pdf

- More property tax credits for individuals rather than governments
- Corrections spending rose rapidly as the state built and filled prisons
- State funding for Medicaid (i.e., BadgerCare) repeatedly rose since its 1999 inception
- Decelerating state tax revenues between 1999 and 2012, due to
 - Indexing the state income tax to inflation in 1999
 - State income tax rates being lowered in 2000
 - Recessions in 2001 and 2008-09

Since shared revenues from the State of Wisconsin are declining, this means **Richland County has had to rely more on property taxes to finance departments that need additional revenues**, as shown in the following chart:



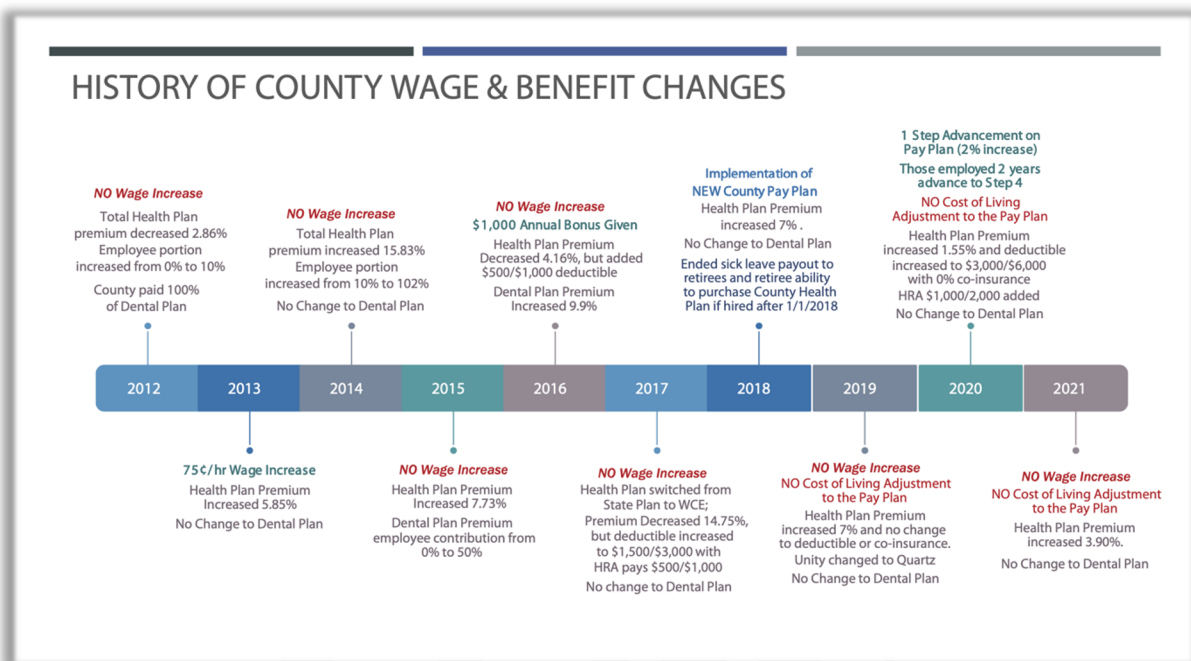
Note: Over the coming months, the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee will be working with the Finance & Personnel Standing Committee to better understand the development of the State of Wisconsin budget, as it relates to state shared revenues.

[Category #4: Highway Department](#)
[Information forthcoming](#)

[Category #5: UW-Richland Campus](#)
[Information forthcoming](#)

Where Do We Go from Here?

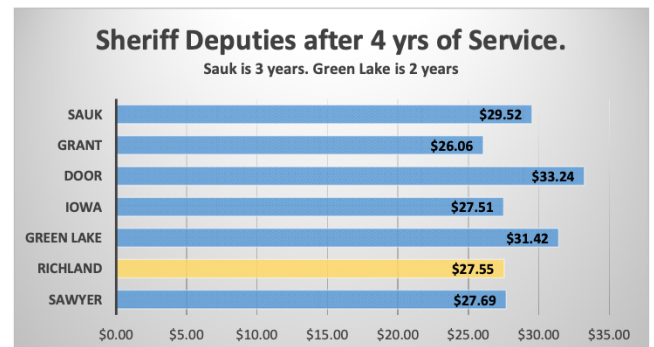
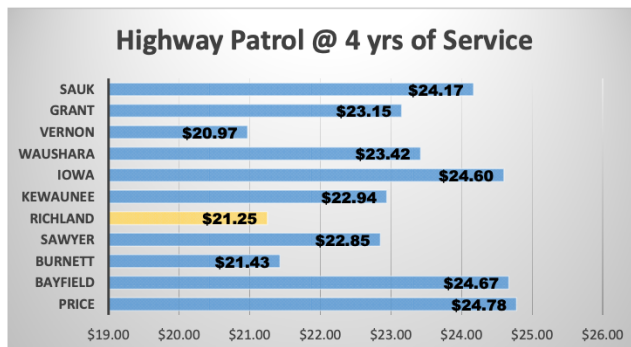
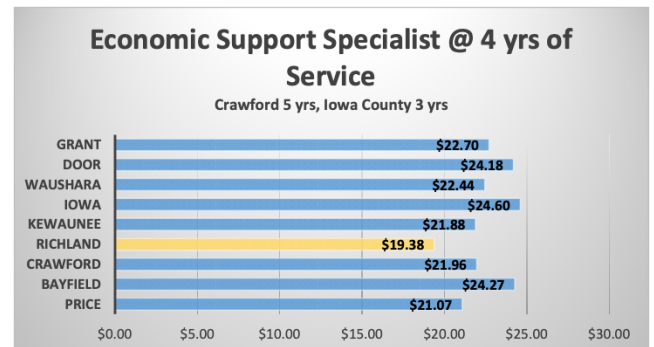
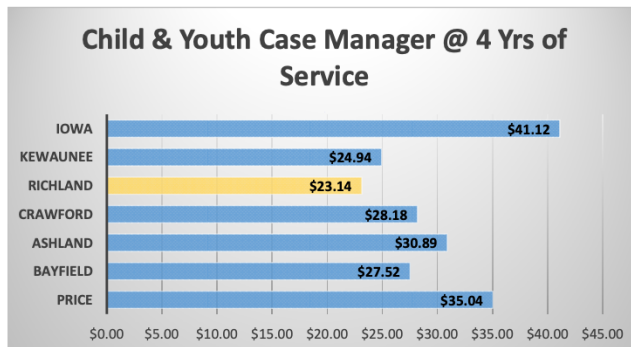
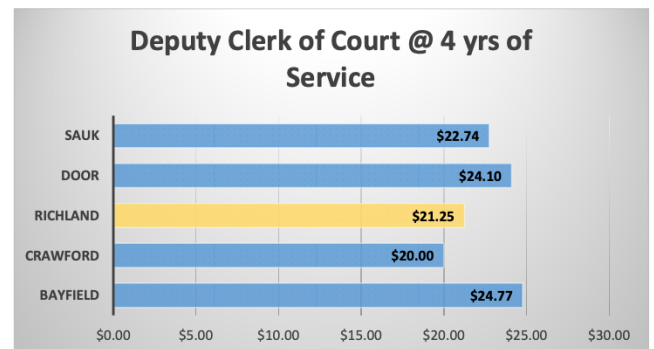
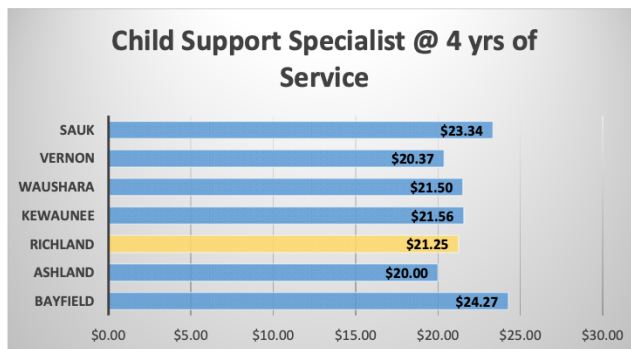
Over the past decade, Richland County has been responding to the State of Wisconsin's policies by **skipping annual pay increases and reducing health insurance benefits**, as shown in the following graphic.



Earlier this year, Richland County adopted a Strategic Plan⁷ that determined that path is no longer sustainable, with a **commitment to annual pay increases for employees**.

Current wages for select positions show how Richland County compares to peer counties in the following charts:

⁷ <https://administrator.co.richland.wi.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Richland-County-Strategic-Plan-Chapter-2-Operations.pdf>



Current staffing levels for County departments show how Richland County compares to peer counties in the following charts:

Department	Richland*	Bayfield**	Burnett***	Kewaunee****	Grant*****	Sauk*****
Population of County	17,300	16,200	16,500	20,600	51,900	65,800
Pine Valley Community Village	85				112	125
Health & Human Services	75	47	47	43	110	195
Sheriff	33	46	39	37	57	53
Highway	30	26	22	28	52	62
Ambulance / Emergency Management	8	1	1	2	2	2
UW-Extension	5	6	2	6	6	7
Administration	4	2	5	6	5	13
Land Conservation & Parks	4	15	10	9	4	12
Clerk of Court	3	5	8	4	9	15
Management Information Systems	3	4	2	2	5	14
Symons Rec Complex	3					
Treasurer	3	2	3	2	3	3
Zoning & Sanitation	3	11	5	1	4	6
Child Support Office	2	3	3	3	6	11
Clerk	2	4	5	2	4	4
Courthouse Maintenance	2	3	6	4	6	14
District Attorney	2	4	4	2	4	8
Register of Deeds	2	3	2	2	3	3
Register in Probate	2			3	3	2
UW Food Service	2					
Veterans Service	2	1	2	2	2	5
Coroner	1		5		1	
Corporation Counsel	1		2	1	1	6
Economic Development	1	1	1			1
Fair & Recycling	1				3	
Airport			4		0	1
Family Court	0			1		2
Total	279	184	178	160	402	564
*Richland County: Rounded to nearest whole number; full-time + contract staff included; part-time/seasonal/reserve/limited term staff generally not included						
** Bayfield County: Full-time employees only (no part-time employees included); Clerk of Court includes Register in Probate; Zoning includes 5 Land Records employees; Economic Development is Tourism; Land Conservation includes 11 Forestry employees						
*** Burnett County: Part-time employees included; Courthouse Maintenance is Maintenance; Zoning includes 3 Surveyor/Land Records employees; Land Conservation includes 6 Forestry employees						
**** Kewaunee County Notes: FTE employee count (individual employee count is not shown); Courthouse Maintenance is Maintenance; Land Conservation & Parks includes Fair and Zoning; Zoning is Land Information						
***** Grant County: FTE employee count (individual employee count is not available); Administration includes Finance & Personnel Dept staff (no Administrator); Courthouse Maintenance is Facilities & Maintenance, Grant County contributes to an Economic Development Corporation						
***** Sauk County: Individual employee count (including part-time employees) but no contracted employees are included except UW Extension; Courthouse Maintenance is Building Services; MIS includes GIS and property lister; Economic Development is Community Development Coordinator						

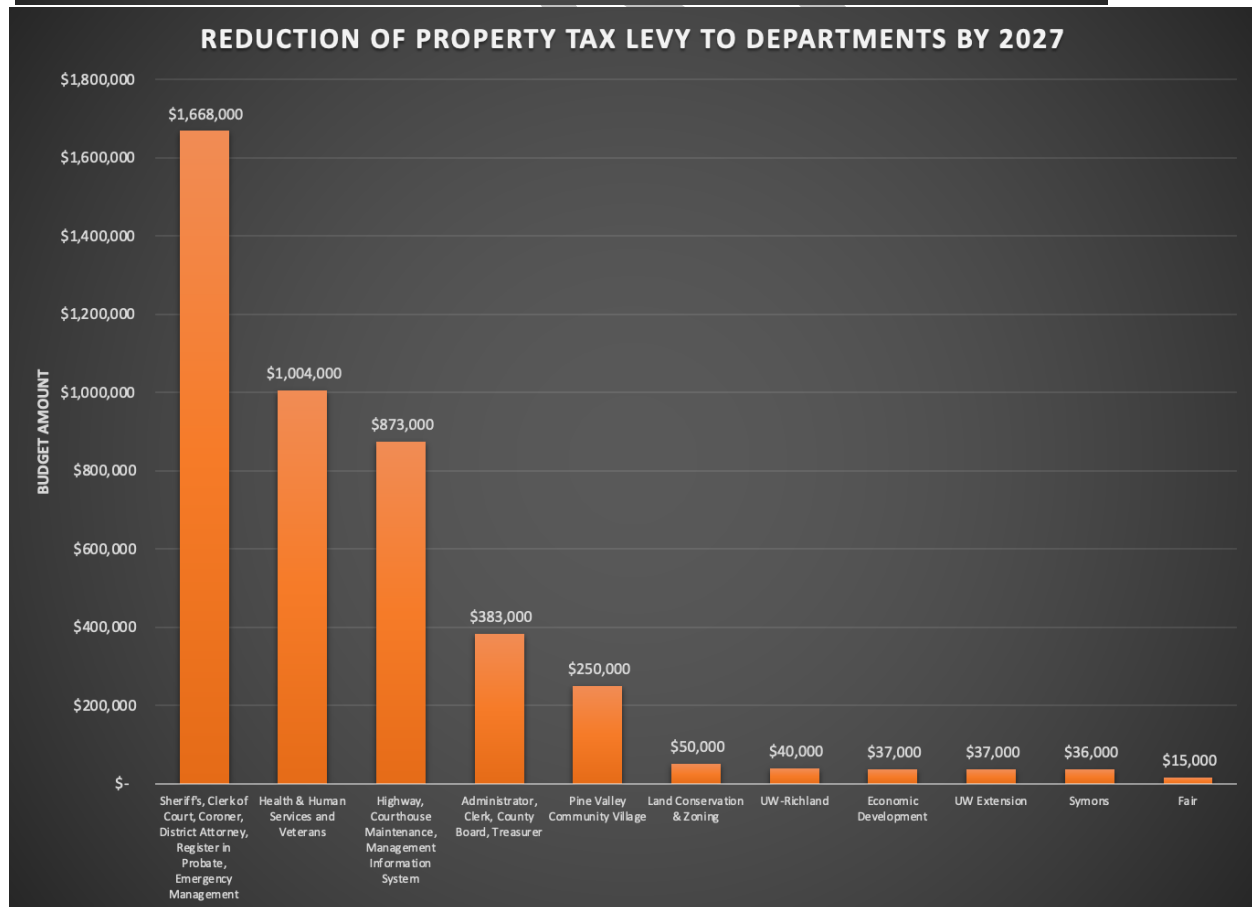
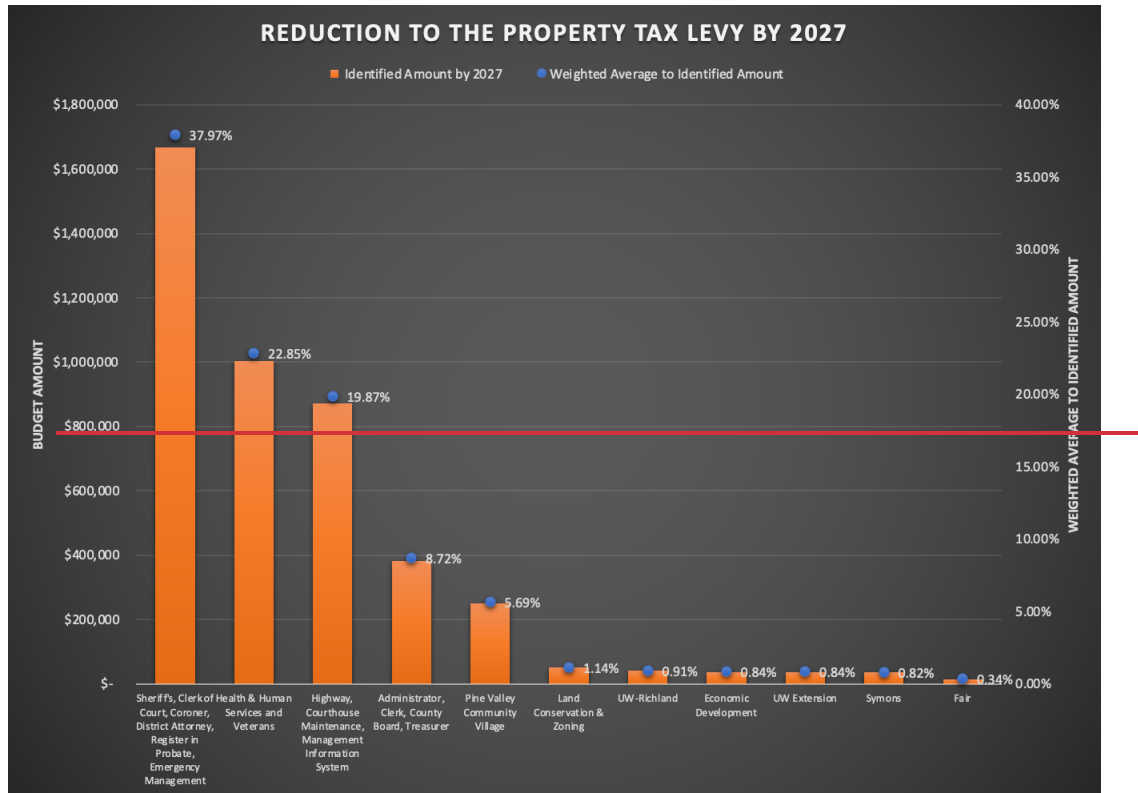
The County Administrator has also created a 5-year (2023 – 2027) financial plan that **estimates the additional revenues that will be needed** to deliver those pay increases to remain competitive and fund other County priorities, such as finance, human resources, and maintenance positions.

The County Board also recently adopted a set of resolutions guiding committees and departments as to how to decrease their impact on the property tax levy. **Some of these decreases may be permanent, but some may be identified for a potential property tax operating levy referendum in 2023, to take effect in 2024.**

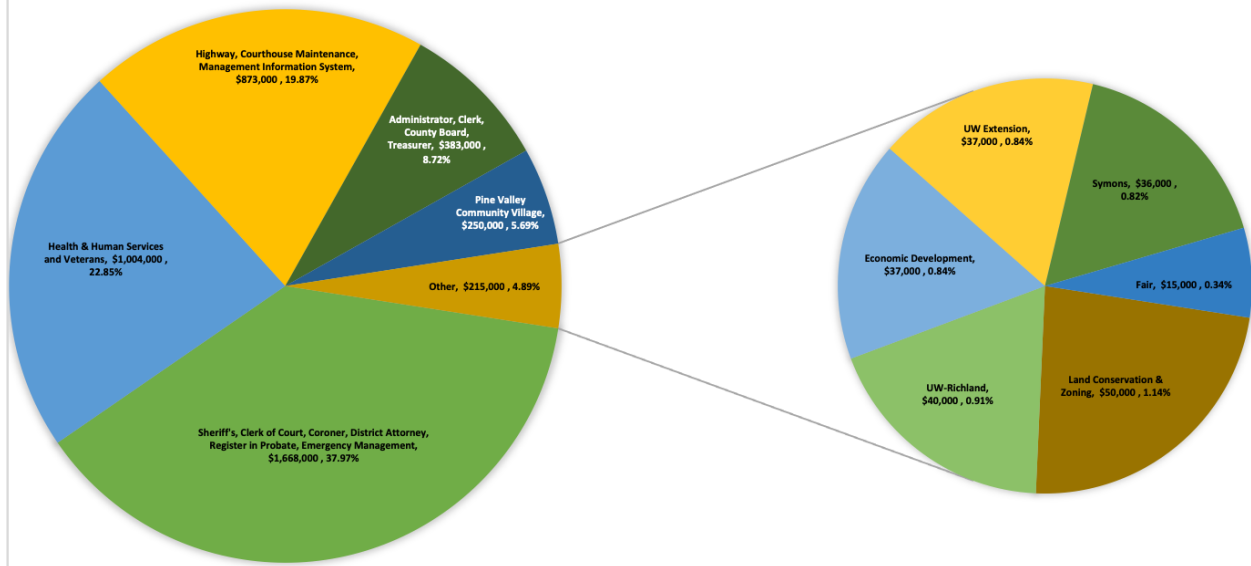
Note that many of these reductions in the property tax levy begin in 2024 and escalate to the amounts shown in the following chart/s in 2027, to account for increasing costs such as wages and benefits.

Departments and committees may meet these reductions to the property tax levy by any of the following methods:

1. Decreased expenses
2. Increased revenues from sources other than the property tax levy
3. Increased revenues from an operating levy referendum *(assuming such a referendum is recommended by the County Board and passed by voters)*



REDUCTION TO THE PROPERTY TAX LEVY BY 2027



Total:
\$4.4 million

Next Steps

The Referendum Ad Hoc Committee has identified the following next steps:

1. Communicate directly with committees and departments heads affected by a potential referendum, so that expectations are clear:
 - Share this report
 - Share the Committee's public education plans
 - Short-term (September/October): Educate the public about the work of the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee
 - Long-term (TBD): If the Committee recommends moving forward with an operating levy referendum in 2023, educational materials will be developed for the approximate 2-month period before the ballot measure is placed on the ballot
 - Request information needed by the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee
 - How each committee plans to describe the identified property tax levy decrease
 - Which budget amounts will be recommended as a permanent decrease, and which budget amounts will be recommended for inclusion on a potential property tax operating levy referendum, to take effect in 2024
 - Collect questions each committee has for the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee
2. Research other operating levy referendums
3. Educate the public about the work of the committee
 - Radio
 - Newspaper
 - Video
4. Recommend action on the referendum, including:
 - Whether or not to develop a referendum question
 - The date, amount, and purpose of a potential operating levy referendum
 - Public education content and format for a potential operating levy referendum
 - The consequences/outcome of a failed operating levy referendum
5. Draft a report for submittal to the committee we report to (Finance & Personnel Standing Committee)

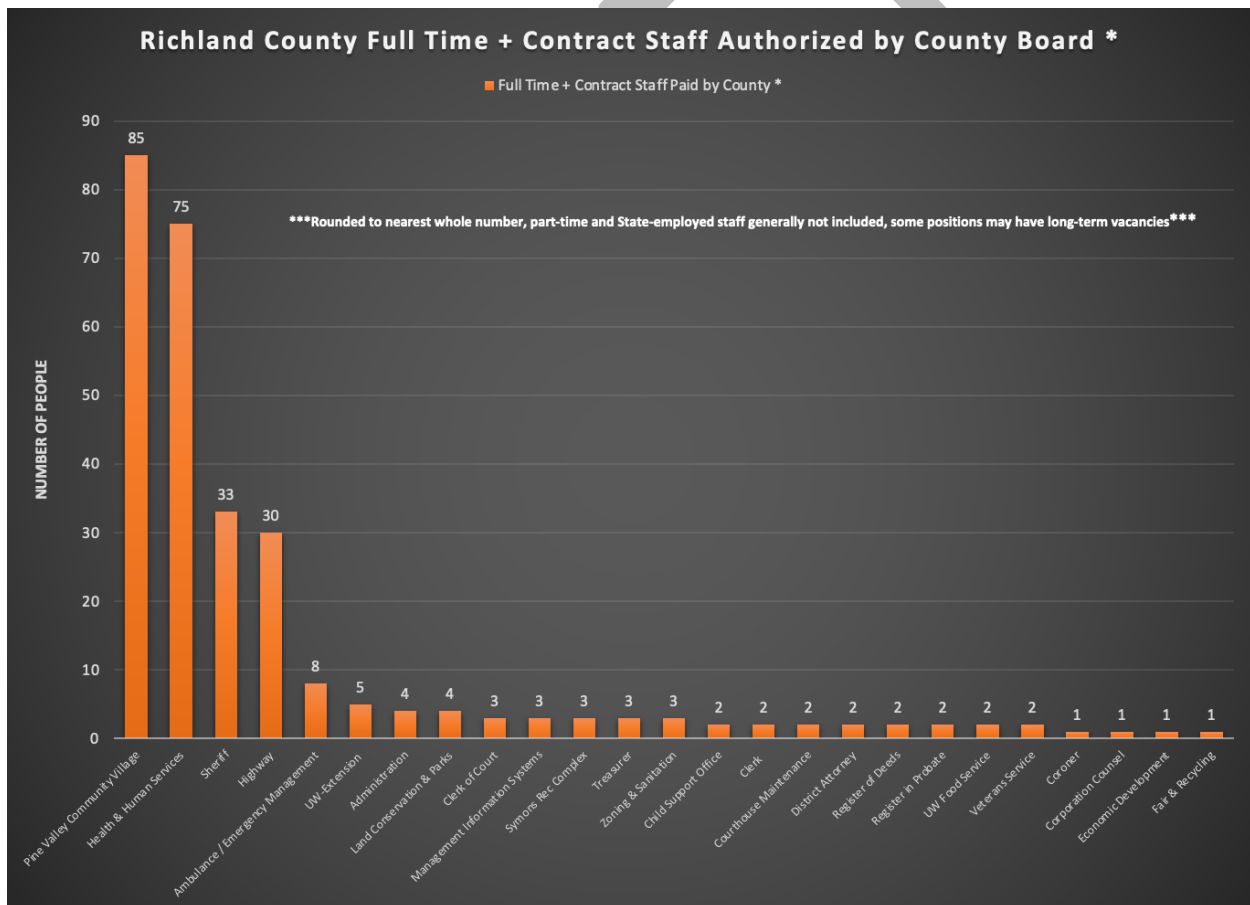
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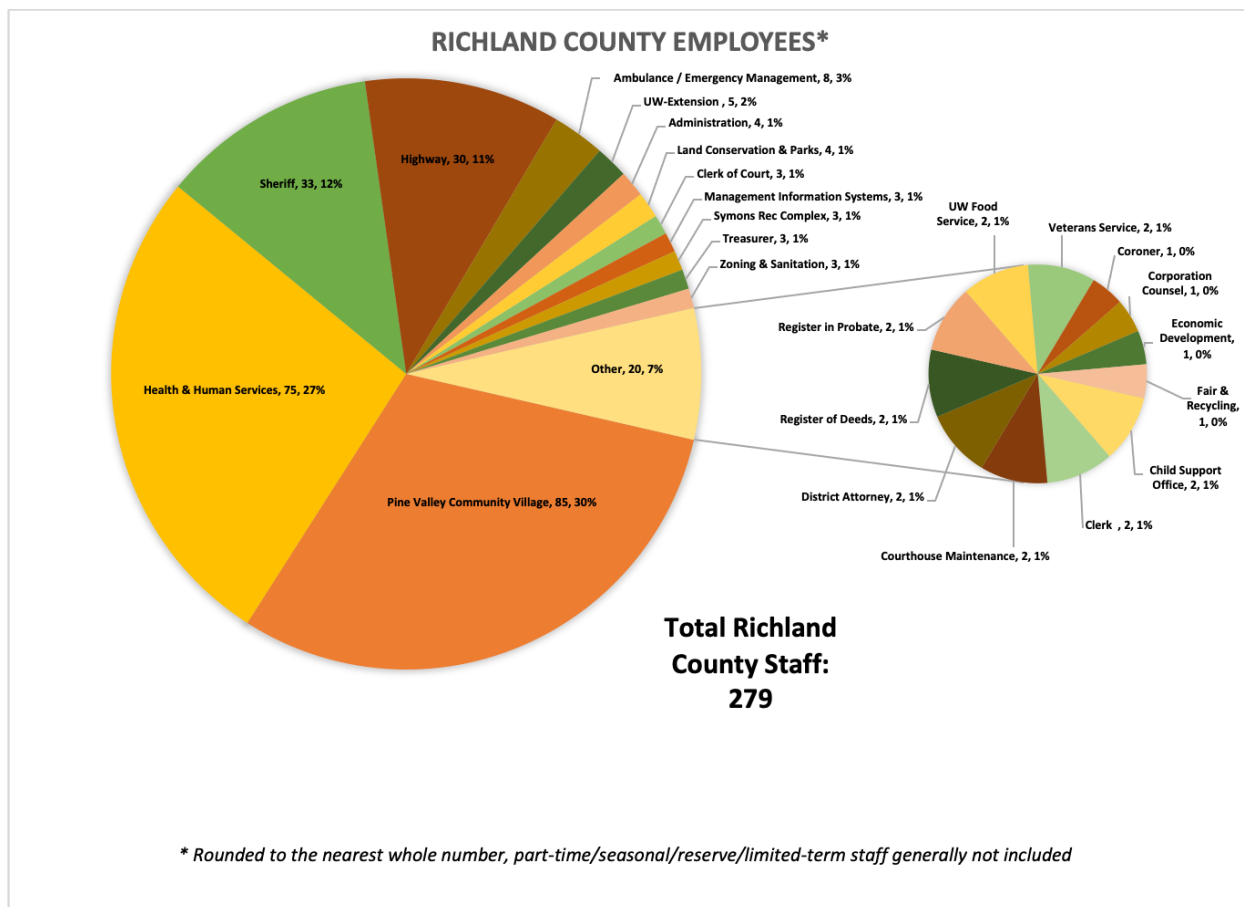
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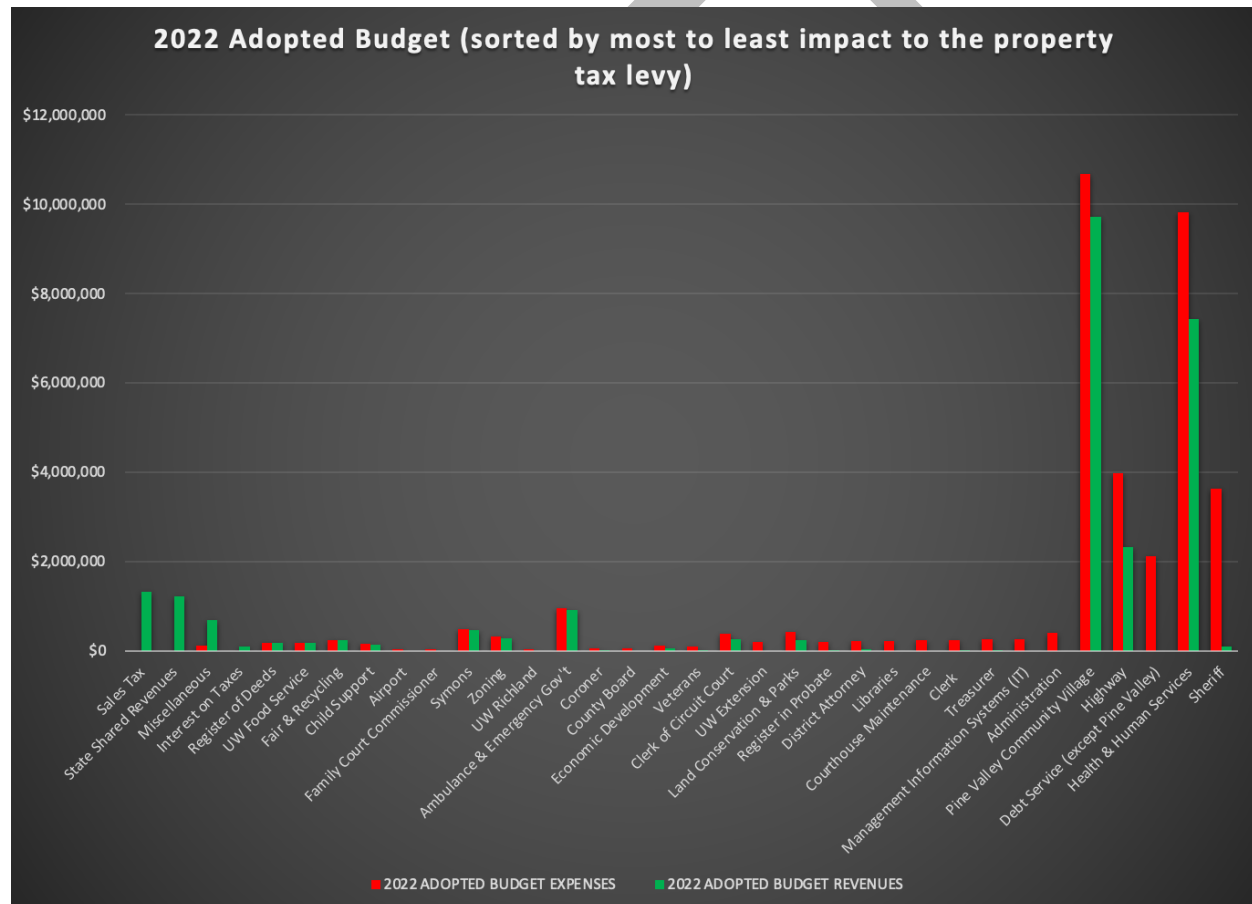
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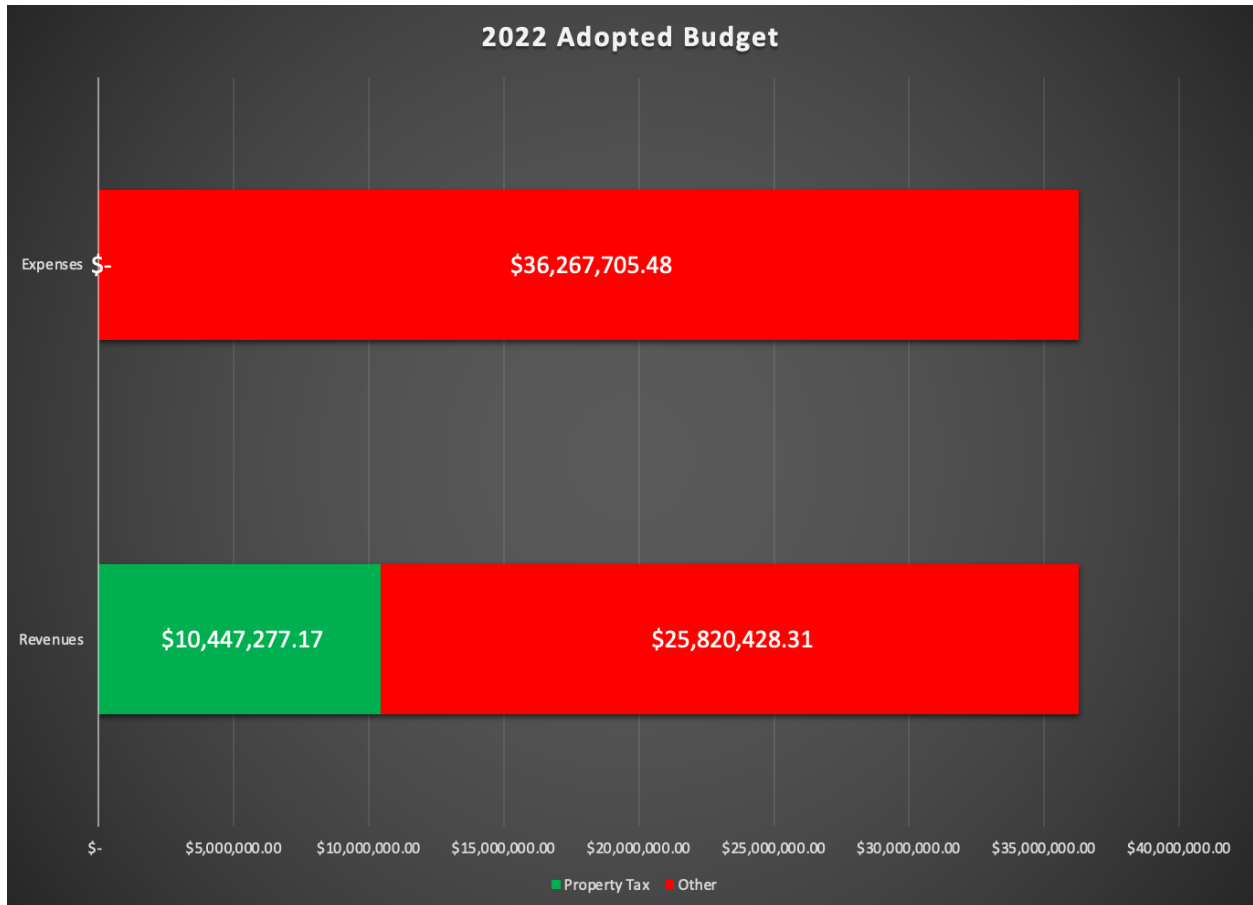
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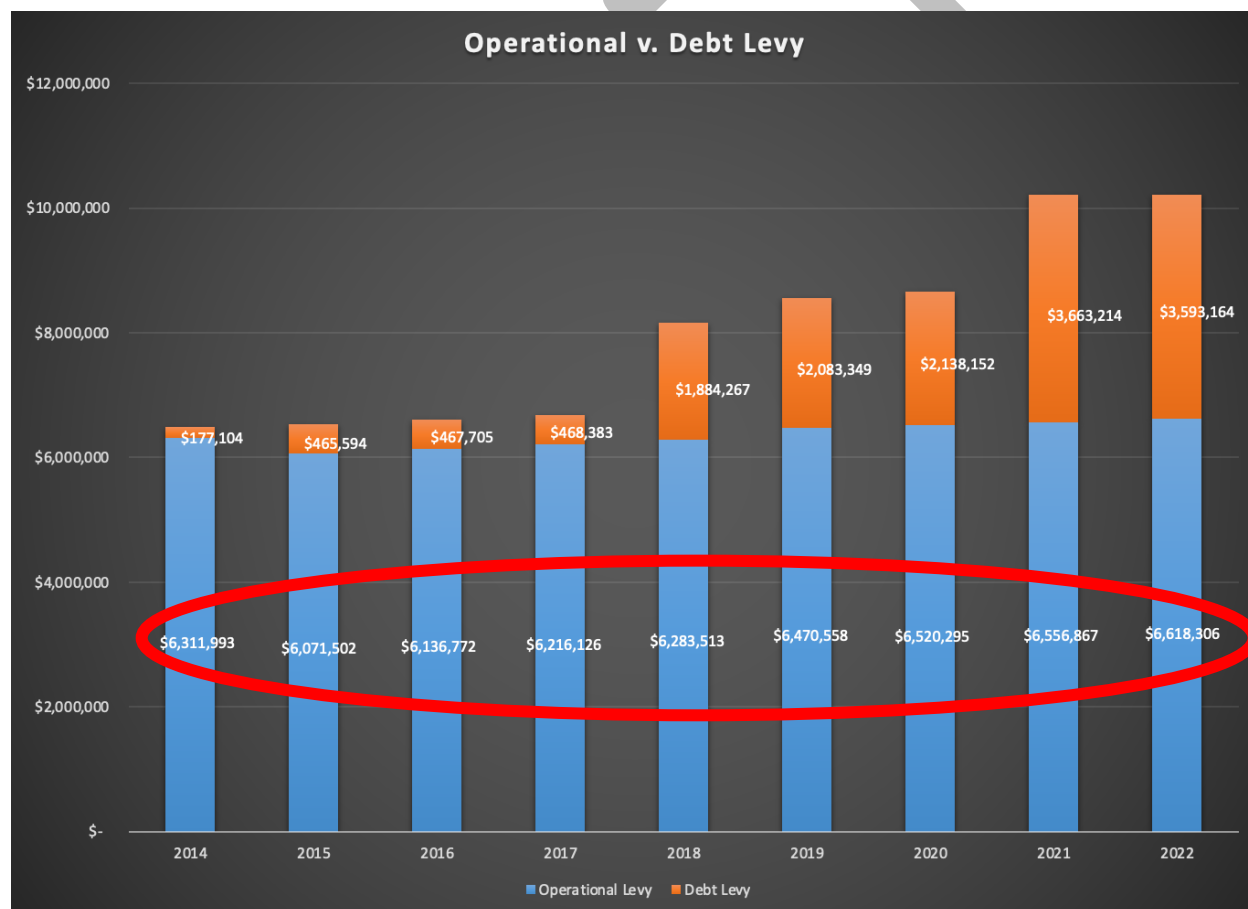


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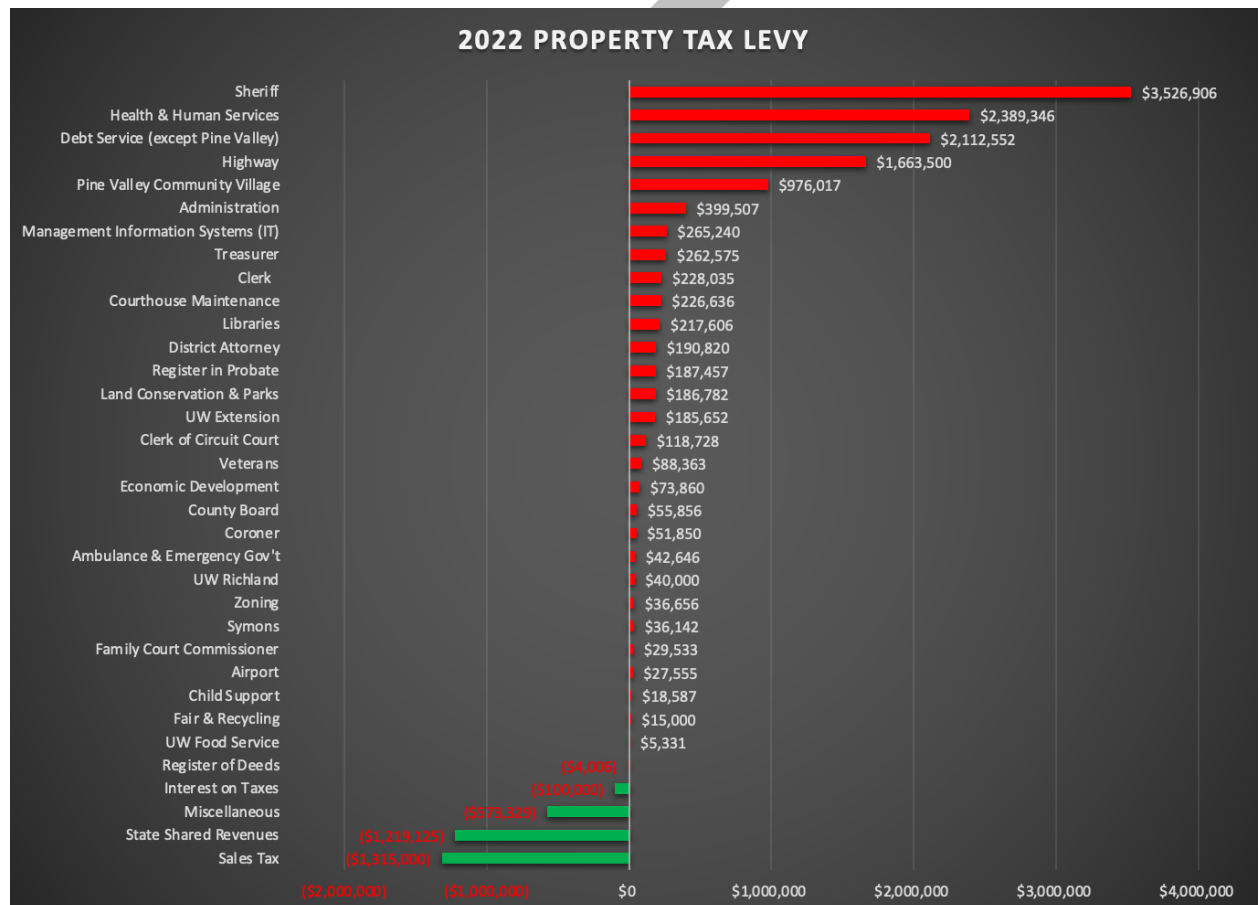
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Departments Relying on the Property Tax

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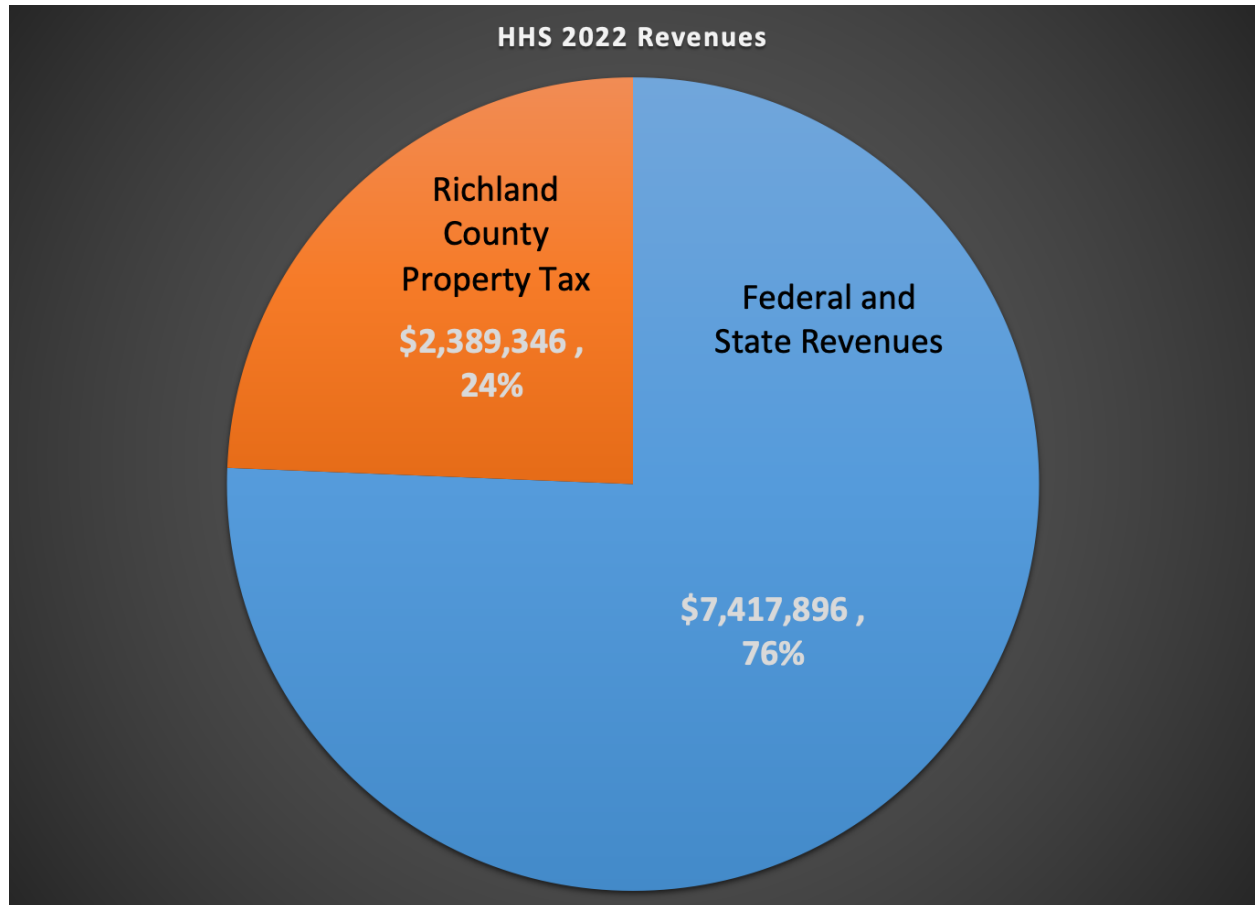


Next, we'll look at three categories that often have associated misconceptions: 1) Health & Human Services, 2) Pine Valley Community Village, and 3) State Shared Revenue.

Category #1: Health & Human Services

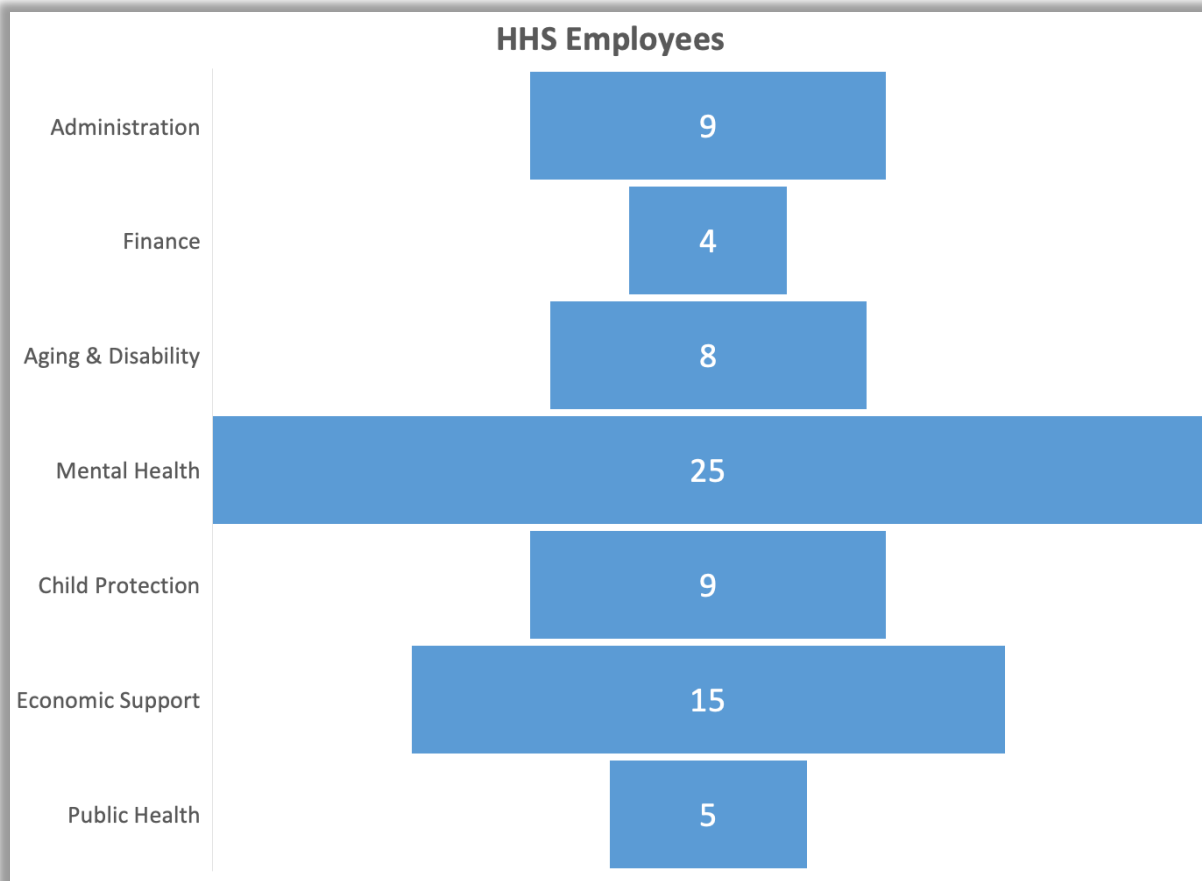
As shown in previous charts, the Health & Human Services (HHS) Department has the 2nd highest number of employees out of any department at the County. At the same time, this department uses less property tax revenue than the Sheriff's Department (\$2.4 million for HHS vs. \$3.5 million for Sheriff). Why is this?

It's because **HHS brings in a lot of revenue from the federal and state governments.**



If the County reduced its property tax revenue contribution to HHS, some of these federal and state revenues would be lost.

People also often think HHS is primarily a welfare agency. **While economic support is important, it's one of only 5 main areas of service to residents.** More employees are dedicated to mental health services than economic support, as shown in this chart:



Note: Over the coming months, the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee will be working with the Health & Human Services and Veterans Standing Committee to better understand how federal and state funding is tied to employee positions.

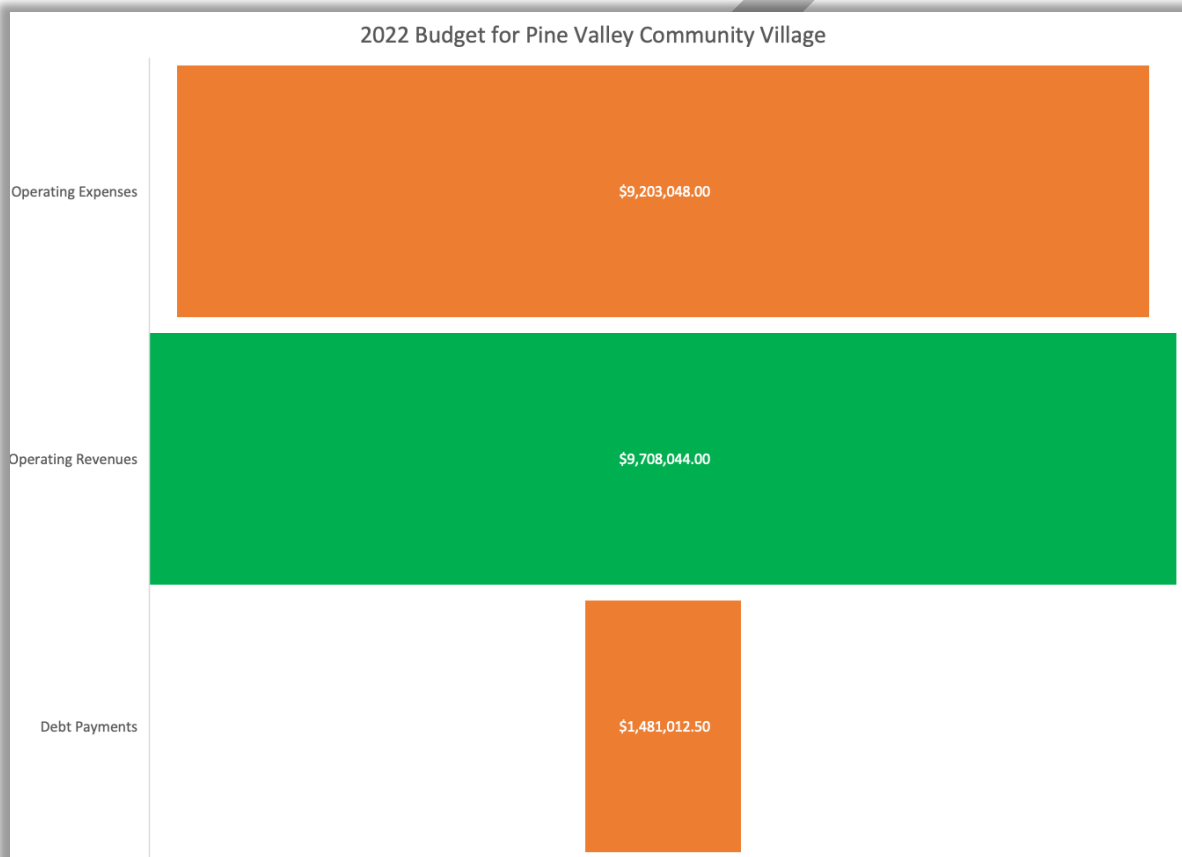
Category #2: Pine Valley Community Village

It is often said that Pine Valley Community Village:

1. Makes a profit for the County
2. Doesn't pay its debt

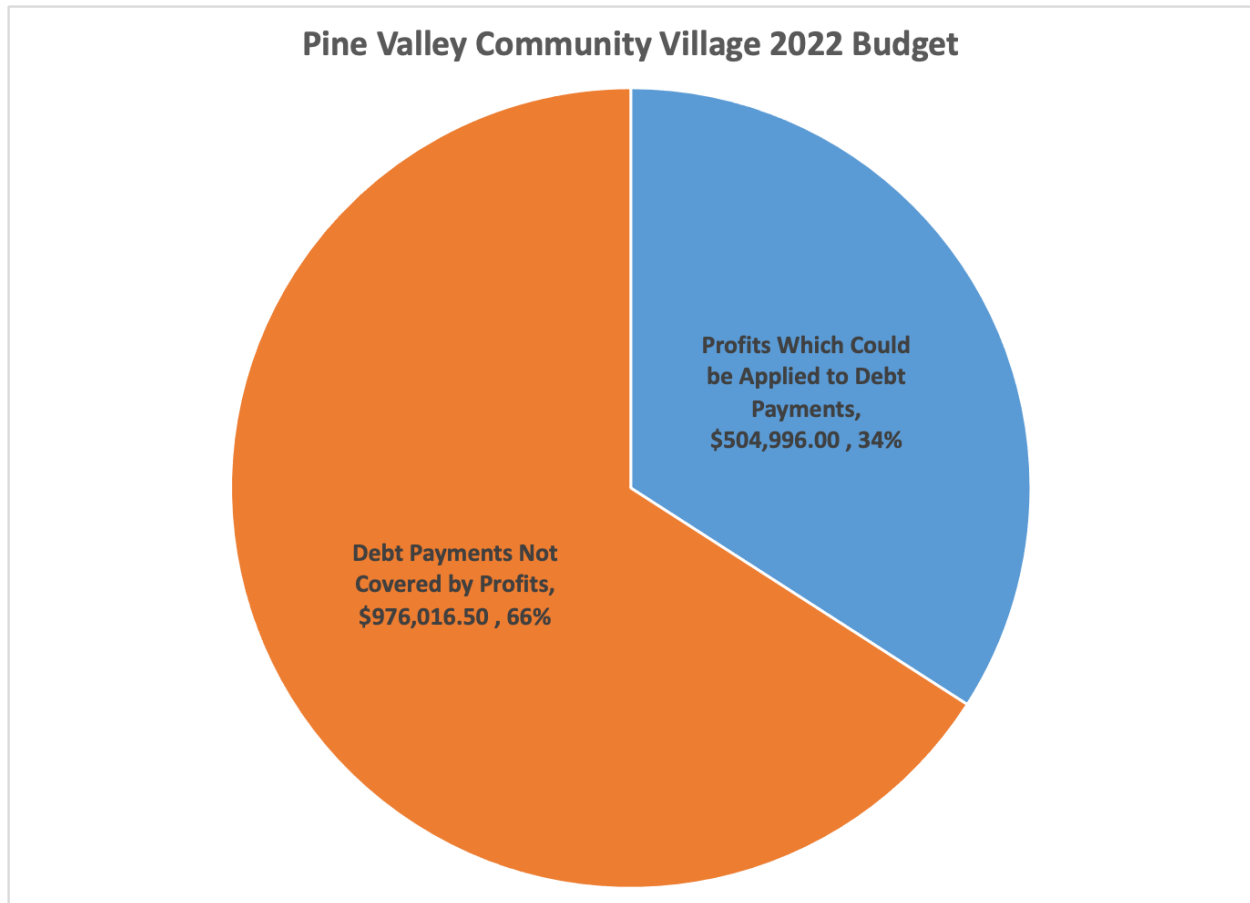
Which is true?

There is some truth to both statements, but neither is totally accurate. Because of the state laws referred to earlier, the County keeps track of Pine Valley's budget in two categories – operating and debt:



Statement #1 would be more accurate if it said, **"Pine Valley makes an operating profit for the County."**

In recent years, the operating profit from Pine Valley has been applied to offset the operating expenses of other departments at the County. **If that operating profit was instead applied to debt payments, it would cover one-third of annual debt payments**, as shown in the following chart:



So, statement #2 would be more accurate if it said, **“Pine Valley’s operating profits could cover one-third of its debt payments, if those profits were not used by the County Board to offset the operating expenses of other County departments.”**

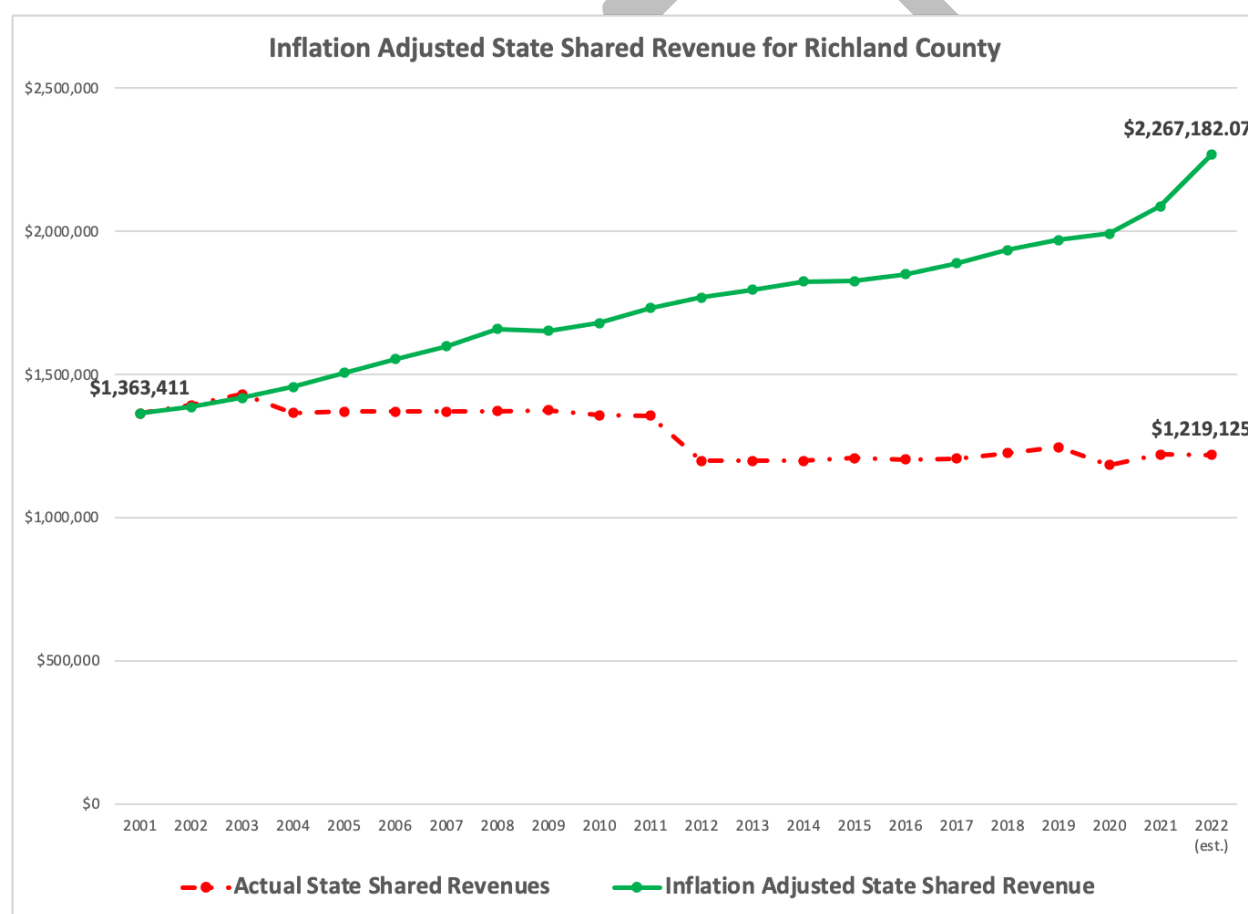
Note: Over the coming months, the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee will be working with the Pine Valley & Child Support Standing Committee to better understand if operating profits can be increased to cover 50% of its debt payments.

Category #3: State Shared Revenue

State shared revenue comes from the State of Wisconsin. **Every local government agency in Wisconsin receives this revenue.**

Shared revenue was originally put in place in the early 1900's to share state income tax revenue with local governments in exchange for a reduction in property that could be taxed³. In the 1970's, shared revenues were begun to be used to level the playing field between communities with lower income tax revenues and wealthier parts of the state.⁴

In 2001, Richland County received \$1.36 million that could be spent on general government activities such as public safety, human services, and highways. **In 2021, the State shared \$1.22 million, a drop of 12%.** If the amount received in 2001 was adjusted for inflation⁵, the amount would be \$2.27 million.



3

https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/informational_papers/january_2017/0018_shared_revenue_program_informational_paper_18.pdf

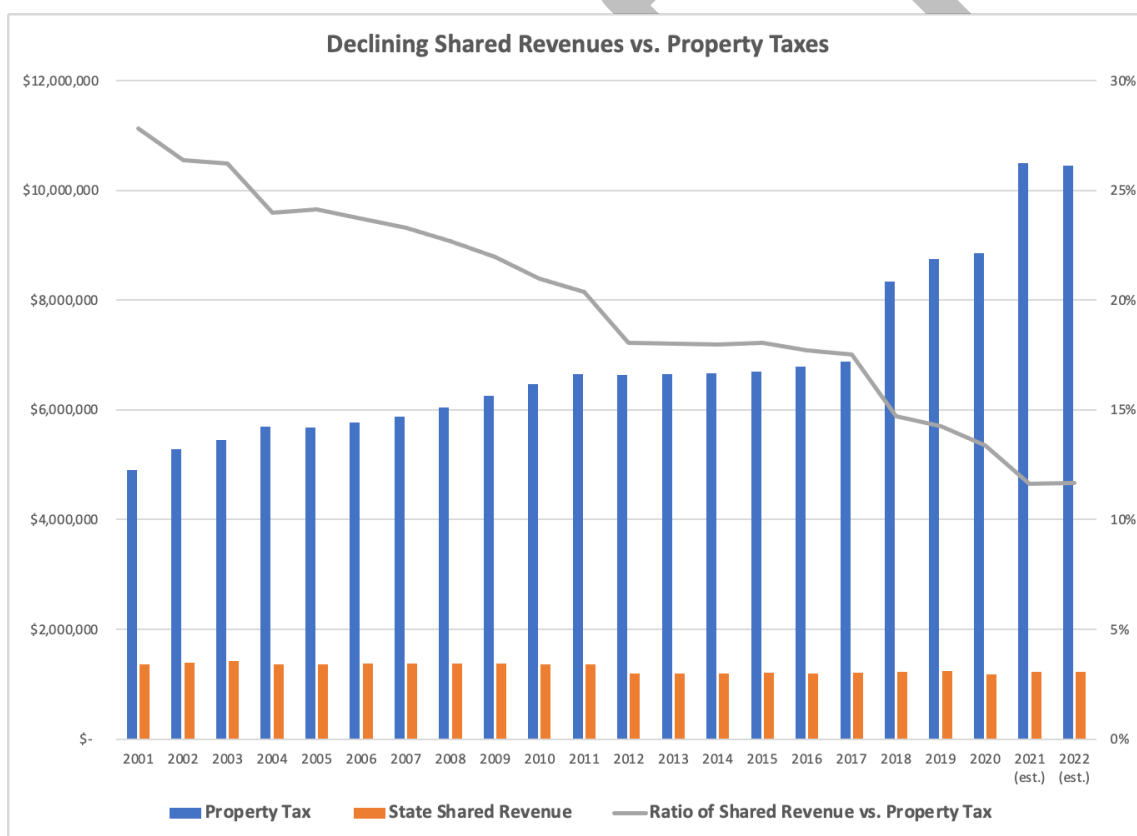
⁴ <https://lwm-info.org/DocumentCenter/View/5904/8-22-The-Municipality-State-Local-Partnership>

⁵ <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/about-us/monetary-policy/inflation-calculator/consumer-price-index-1913->

Why is shared revenue from the State declining? According to a Wisconsin Policy Forum report from 2013, the following state spending priorities shifted after 1995⁶:

- More focus on school aid
- More property tax credits for individuals rather than governments
- Corrections spending rose rapidly as the state built and filled prisons
- State funding for Medicaid (i.e., BadgerCare) repeatedly rose since its 1999 inception
- Decelerating state tax revenues between 1999 and 2012, due to
 - Indexing the state income tax to inflation in 1999
 - State income tax rates being lowered in 2000
 - Recessions in 2001 and 2008-09

Since shared revenues from the State of Wisconsin are declining, this means **Richland County has had to rely more on property taxes to finance departments that need additional revenues**, as shown in the following chart:



Note: Over the coming months, the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee will be working with the Finance & Personnel Standing Committee to better understand the development of the State of Wisconsin budget, as it relates to state shared revenues.

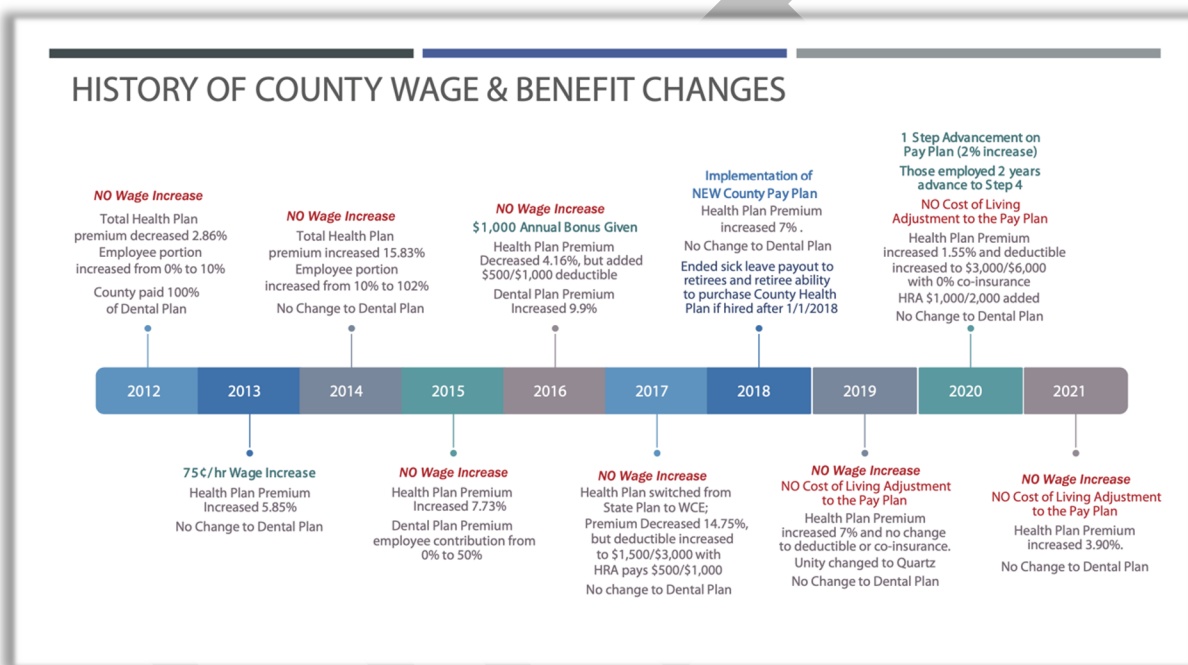
⁶ https://wispolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/13_04-Local-Gov-Finances.pdf

Category #4: Highway Department
Information forthcoming

Category #5: UW-Richland Campus
Information forthcoming

Where Do We Go from Here?

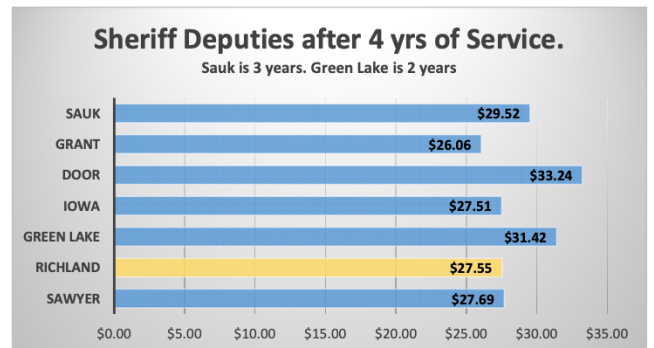
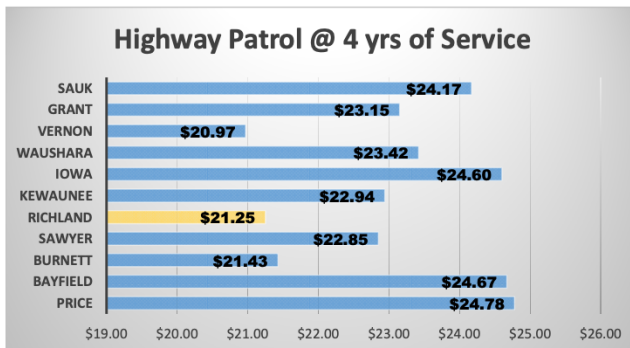
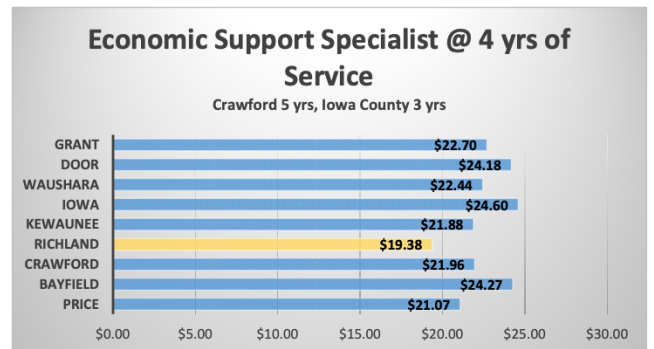
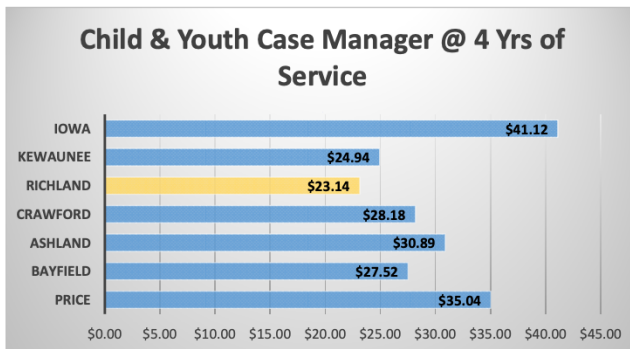
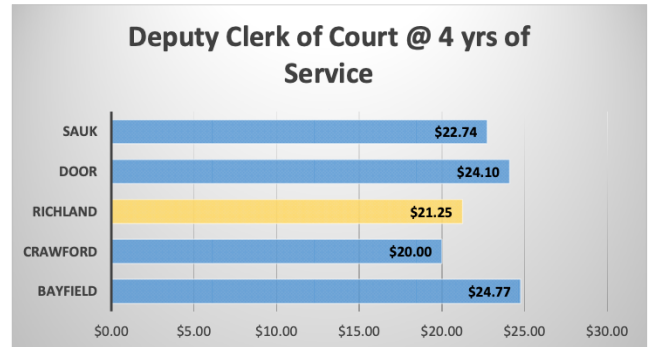
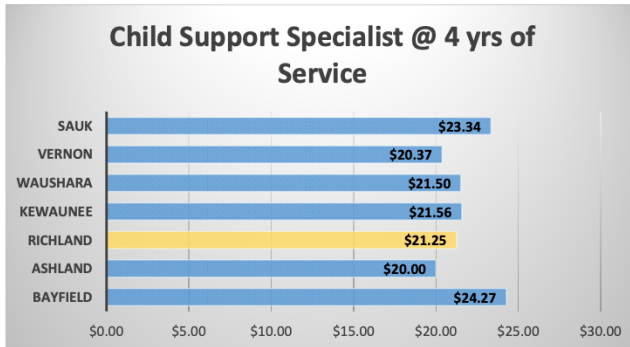
Over the past decade, **Richland County has been responding to the State of Wisconsin's policies by skipping annual pay increases and reducing health insurance benefits**, as shown in the following graphic.



Earlier this year, Richland County adopted a Strategic Plan⁷ that determined that path is no longer sustainable, with a **commitment to annual pay increases for employees**.

⁷ <https://administrator.co.richland.wi.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Richland-County-Strategic-Plan-Chapter-2-Operations.pdf>

Current wages for select positions show how Richland County compares to peer counties in the following charts:



Current staffing levels for County departments show how Richland County compares to peer counties in the following charts:

Department	Richland*	Bayfield**	Burnett***	Kewaunee****	Grant*****	Sauk*****
Population of County	17,300	16,200	16,500	20,600	51,900	65,800
Pine Valley Community Village	85				112	125
Health & Human Services	75	47	47	43	110	195
Sheriff	33	46	39	37	57	53
Highway	30	26	22	28	52	62
Ambulance / Emergency Management	8	1	1	2	2	2
UW-Extension	5	6	2	6	6	7
Administration	4	2	5	6	5	13
Land Conservation & Parks	4	15	10	9	4	12
Clerk of Court	3	5	8	4	9	15
Management Information Systems	3	4	2	2	5	14
Symons Rec Complex	3					
Treasurer	3	2	3	2	3	3
Zoning & Sanitation	3	11	5	1	4	6
Child Support Office	2	3	3	3	6	11
Clerk	2	4	5	2	4	4
Courthouse Maintenance	2	3	6	4	6	14
District Attorney	2	4	4	2	4	8
Register of Deeds	2	3	2	2	3	3
Register in Probate	2			3	3	2
UW Food Service	2					
Veterans Service	2	1	2	2	2	5
Coroner	1		5		1	
Corporation Counsel	1		2	1	1	6
Economic Development	1	1	1			1
Fair & Recycling	1				3	
Airport			4		0	1
Family Court	0			1		2
Total	279	184	178	160	402	564

*Richland County: Rounded to nearest whole number; full-time + contract staff included; part-time/seasonal/reserve/limited term staff generally not included

** Bayfield County: Full-time employees only (no part-time employees included); Clerk of Court includes Register in Probate; Zoning includes 5 Land Records employees; Economic Development is Tourism; Land Conservation includes 11 Forestry employees

*** Burnett County: Part-time employees included; Courthouse Maintenance is Maintenance; Zoning includes 3 Surveyor/Land Records employees; Land Conservation includes 6 Forestry employees

**** Kewaunee County Notes: FTE employee count (individual employee count is not shown); Courthouse Maintenance is Maintenance; Land Conservation & Parks includes Fair and Zoning; Zoning is Land Information

***** Grant County: FTE employee count (individual employee count is not available); Administration includes Finance & Personnel Dept staff (no Administrator); Courthouse Maintenance is Facilities & Maintenance, Grant County contributes to an Economic Development Corporation

***** Sauk County: Individual employee count (including part-time employees) but no contracted employees are included except UW Extension; Courthouse Maintenance is Building Services; MIS includes GIS and property lister; Economic Development is Community Development Coordinator

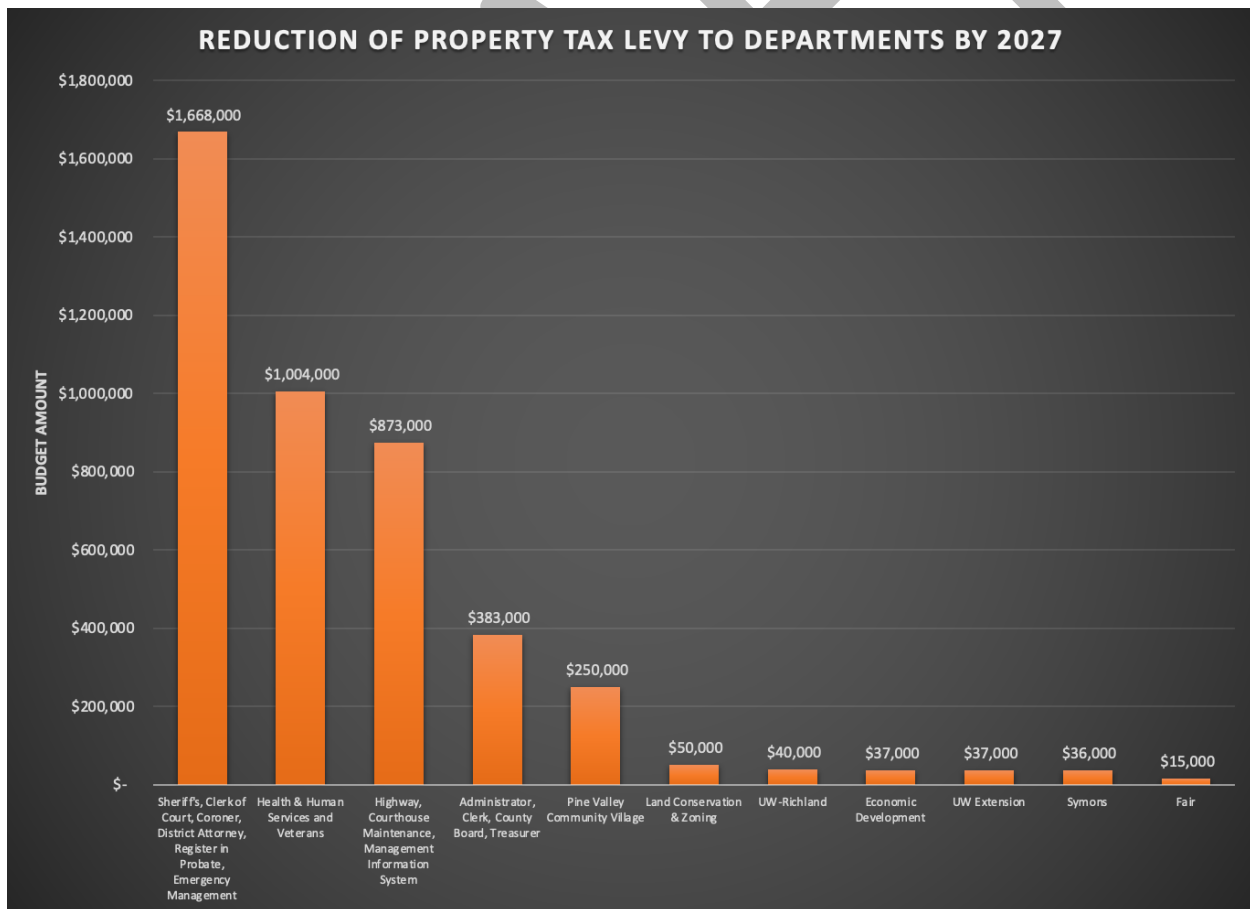
The County Administrator has also created a 5-year (2023 – 2027) financial plan that **estimates the additional revenues that will be needed** to deliver those pay increases to remain competitive and fund other County priorities, such as finance, human resources, and maintenance positions.

The County Board also recently adopted a set of resolutions guiding committees and departments as to how to decrease their impact on the property tax levy. **Some of these decreases may be permanent, but some may be identified for a potential property tax operating levy referendum in 2023, to take effect in 2024.**

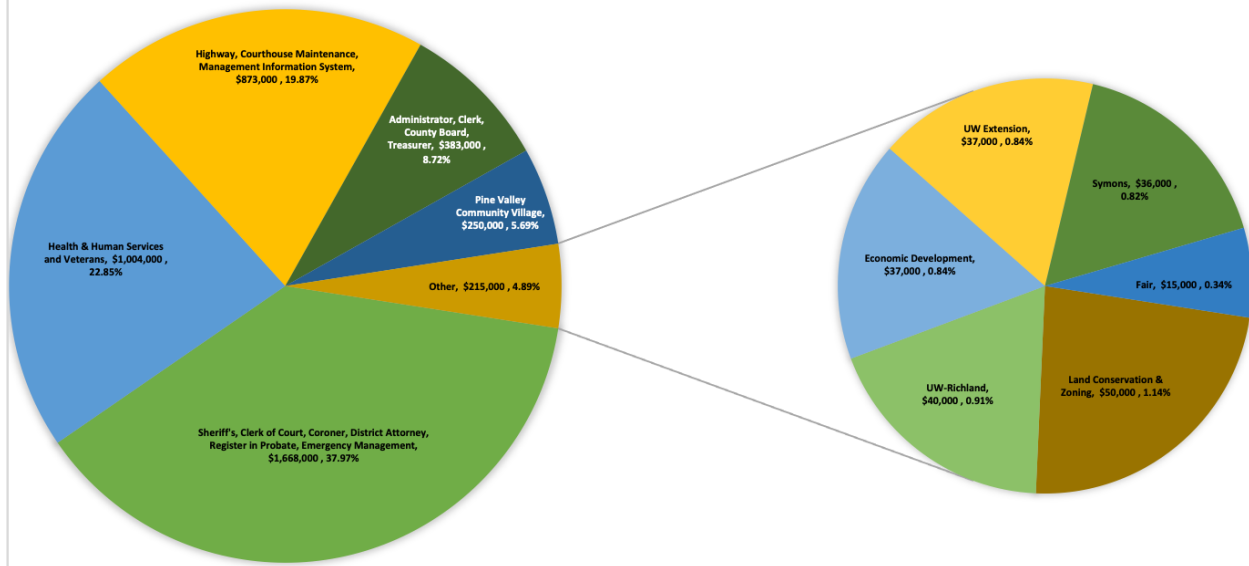
Note that many of these reductions in the property tax levy begin in 2024 and escalate to the amounts shown in the following chart/s in 2027, to account for increasing costs such as wages and benefits.

Departments and committees may meet these reductions to the property tax levy by any of the following methods:

1. Decreased expenses
2. Increased revenues from sources other than the property tax levy
3. Increased revenues from an operating levy referendum *(assuming such a referendum is recommended by the County Board and passed by voters)*



REDUCTION TO THE PROPERTY TAX LEVY BY 2027



Total:
\$4.4 million

Next Steps

The Referendum Ad Hoc Committee has identified the following next steps:

1. Communicate directly with committees and departments heads affected by a potential referendum, so that expectations are clear:
 - Share this report
 - Share the Committee's public education plans
 - Short-term (September/October): Educate the public about the work of the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee
 - Long-term (TBD): If the Committee recommends moving forward with an operating levy referendum in 2023, educational materials will be developed for the approximate 2-month period before the ballot measure is placed on the ballot
 - Request information needed by the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee
 - How each committee plans to describe the identified property tax levy decrease
 - Which budget amounts will be recommended as a permanent decrease, and which budget amounts will be recommended for inclusion on a potential property tax operating levy referendum, to take effect in 2024
 - Collect questions each committee has for the Referendum Ad Hoc Committee
2. Research other operating levy referendums
3. Educate the public about the work of the committee
 - Radio
 - Newspaper
 - Video
4. Recommend action on the referendum, including:
 - Whether or not to develop a referendum question
 - The date, amount, and purpose of a potential operating levy referendum
 - Public education content and format for a potential operating levy referendum
 - The consequences/outcome of a failed operating levy referendum
5. Draft a report for submittal to the committee we report to (Finance & Personnel Standing Committee)

Richland County Information Exchange

- [Aaron Dettmann](#)

Thanks for the good communication, keeping us informed!

- Like
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•

[Chris Storer](#)

Thanks for the update. What happened with the department heads trying to cut expenses first. Referendum is the first go to? Ever consider taking an inventory of all the County's equipment and selling the duplication or even triplicate of items. Have a more centralized area of equipment? Feasible? What happened to getting permission on a purchase instead of purchasing it and then telling the County that they need to pay for something.. example having office carpeted without permission first? Ever veto a bill to be paid? Only takes once of saying no to make an example. Does it sound like it is my checkbook paying for everything? Well, it kinda is. Exhaust other possibilities before going to referendum first.

6

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-

[Lea Heather](#)

[Chris Storer](#) Well said Chris! Any answers??

- Like
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-

[Chris Storer](#)

[Lea Heather](#) nope. Not yet. Hopefully soon???

- Like
- Reply
- Share
- [2w](#)

○

[Aaron Dettmann](#)

I went to a few of the meetings, and I heard that if they do go to referendum, this would be the first every county referendum for Richland County. I think our county government has been getting more efficient over the years, but with less money coming from the state, it means either cutting programs, or going to referendum.

"Since at least 2003, the State of Wisconsin has been reducing its shared revenues, which returns the income and sales taxes it collects to local governments. In 2001, Richland County government received \$1.36 million. By 2022, that number had fallen to \$1.22 million. If adjusted for inflation, that amount today would be \$2.27 million."

I know the county also provides money for many optional programs that other counties don't have, like the fair, UW-Extension, ect., which provides a better quality of life and more things to do, but also costs more money. So it would be a question of what is the priority.

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[Chris Storer](#)

[Aaron Dettmann](#) oh I am well aware of the ever decreasing reduction in funding from the State. I was a township treasurer for about 20 years. I know that the cost reduction from department heads was supposed to be the start but do not know what happened to that. No one wants to make "cuts" in their department but was this idea exhausted before deciding for referendum? I have asked the question before many times.... Can you explore the possibility of increasing our County sales tax to 1% instead of our .5%? That way everyone helps pay the increase instead of just homeowners. (Anyone coming into Richland County for recreation and doing business besides residents of the County). I have asked what the pros and cons are in doing that were..... no response. Once upon a time, Richland County did NOT have a sales tax. SOMEONE proposed it and the County passed it... Thoughts? Concerns? Hard decisions need to be made. Yes, it is going to hurt but please exhaust all possibilities before assuming a referendum is the first and only answer.

- **Like**
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[Aaron Dettmann](#)

I do know the County Administrator did not recommend going to a referendum - he only advocated for decreasing department budgets, and for cutting programs. However, the multiple hours-long public comment segments across multiple meetings overwhelmingly advocated for going to a referendum to put the decision to the residents of

Richland County, instead of simply doing cuts. So, that's where this referendum possibility is arising from, because the residents of Richland County asked for one.

- **Like**
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▪

[Chris Storer](#)

[Aaron Dettmann](#) thanks for the update. That is too bad.

- **Like**
- **Reply**
- **Share**
- [2w](#)

•

[Margie Freeman](#)

Very informative, need to care for our several hundred Veterans as well and not by relocating the VSO to HHS!

- **Like**
- **Reply**
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•

[LauraMel Payne](#)

Thank you for this info.

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- [2w](#)

•

[Shirley Steiner](#)

Thank you

- **Like**
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[Ricki Bishop](#)

Thank you for the info!

- Like
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Robert M.

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Funding Public Education in Wisconsin: The Property Tax-School Funding Dilemma

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May 2021

Funding Public Education in Wisconsin: The Property Tax-School Funding Dilemma

Andrew Reschovsky*

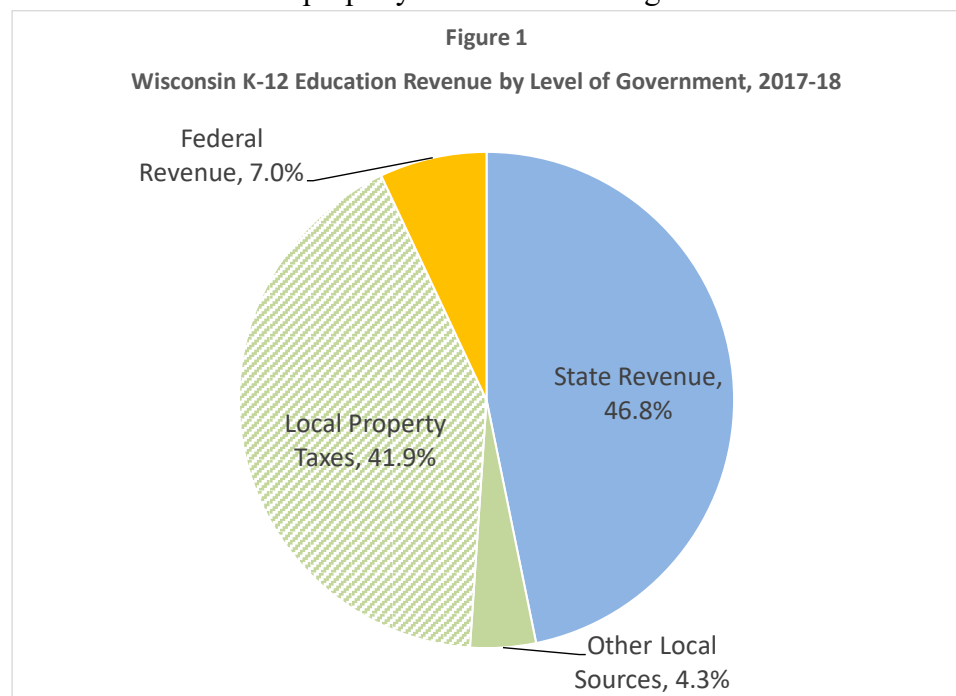
Introduction

For at least the past 30 years, legislative debates about public school funding have been animated by two competing goals: assuring that all schools have sufficient revenues to provide students with a high-quality education and reducing school property taxes. Despite some successes in improving educational quality and in reducing school property taxes, improvements in student academic achievement have stagnated, racial gaps in educational performance are extraordinarily large, and the share of public school revenues coming from the property tax remains above the national average.

This paper traces the development of school finance policies in Wisconsin and highlights deficiencies in state aid policies and the reliance on untargeted property tax relief as among the chief reasons why Wisconsin has failed to solve its property tax-school funding dilemma.

The primary responsibility for providing public education in Wisconsin rests with its 421 independent school districts. As shown in Figure 1, in fiscal year 2018, revenues to fund public education are more or less evenly split between the state government and local school districts, with over 90% of locally-raised revenues coming from the property tax. Alt-

though 14 states rely more heavily on the property tax to fund their schools than Wisconsin, at 41.9%, the share of total school revenue from the property tax in Wisconsin is 10 percentage points higher than the average property tax share across all states.



*The author is Professor Emeritus of Public Affairs and Applied Economics, Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Madison

A Long History of Cutting School Property Taxes

Although Wisconsin's 1848 constitution called for the establishment of school districts that "...shall be as nearly uniform as practicable....," it was not until 1949 that the Legislature established a system of state aid which, in addition to providing each school district with a per pupil grant, included a new grant that allocated more state funds to school districts with lower levels of per student property wealth. In 1973, in a major reform of its school funding system the legislature enacted a *power equalizing* state aid formula designed to reduce reliance on the property tax, weaken the link between the size of a school district's per pupil property tax base and the resources it had available to support per pupil spending, and reduce differences across school districts in per pupil spending.

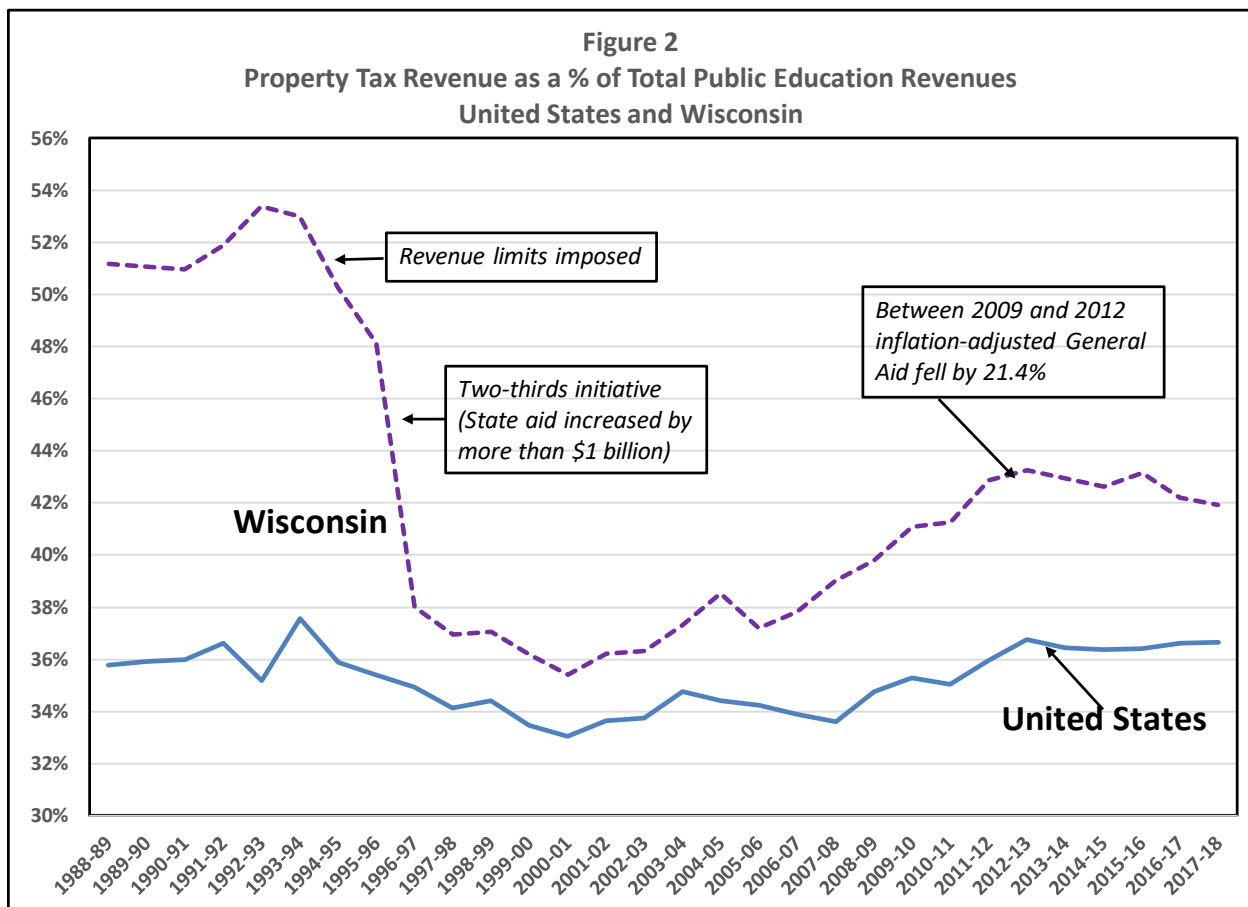
Although members of the legislature had anticipated that local school districts would use increased state aid to reduce property tax levies, during the 1980s and the early 1990s, both school property tax levies and per pupil spending grew rapidly. Between 1983 and 1993 school property tax levies grew in real (inflation-adjusted) terms at an average annual rate of 3.6%, and spending per pupil by 2.7%. As illustrated in Figure 2, by fiscal year 1993, property tax revenue accounted for 53.4% of the total revenues supporting public education in Wisconsin.

During the early 1990s, in response to rising school spending and the annual increases in school property taxes, the legislature took a series of actions designed to reduce school property taxes.

- Prior to 1993, salary and benefit disputes with teachers were resolved using mediation and binding arbitration. Because arbitrators often sided with teachers, the legislature acted to effectively cap increases in teacher compensation. Legislation was enacted that prohibited the use of mediation and arbitration as long as school districts offered teachers a *qualified economic offer* (QEO), which was defined as an annual increase in salary and benefits of at least 3.8%.
- To help enforce property tax reductions, starting in the 1993-94 school year, the legislature restricted the amount of money each school district could raise from the **sum** of its equalization aid allocation and property tax levy. The allowed annual per pupil increase in these *revenue limits* was initially set at \$190. For the following 15 years, this per pupil adjustment to the revenue limits increased at the rate of inflation. Revenues from categorical grants, such as those funding education programs for students with disabilities and revenues from federal grants are not subject to the revenue limit. Despite these exclusions, over 80% of total school district revenues, and hence spending, is subject to the revenue limit. The only way that a school district can increase revenues in excess of the annual revenue cap is through the approval by local voters of an "override" referendum.
- With the revenue limits in place, the legislature enacted a "two-thirds initiative," which entailed a commitment by the state to fund "two-thirds" of the statewide cost of public education. Between 1995-96 and 1996-97, state aid to local school districts was increased by more than \$1 billion (33%). Although the statutory definition of two-thirds inflated the state's

share of total revenue, over the next two years, the increase in state aid resulted in a 26% decline in the average school property tax rate in K-12 school districts.¹ The legislature’s “two-thirds” commitment remained in place until 2003. Since then, each biennium the legislature determines the amount of state aid. Since 2003, the state has failed to maintain its “two-thirds” commitment.

By 2000-01, the combined effect of the QEO, the revenue limit, and the “two-third” initiative had reduced the school property tax as a share of total education revenue to 35.4% (see Figure 2). While the property tax share of revenue remained 2.4 percentage points above the national figure in 2000-01, eight years earlier, the gap between Wisconsin and the U.S. was 18.2 percentage points.



The allowable annual increases in revenue limits (referred to as the revenue limit adjustment) grew at approximately the rate of inflation between fiscal years 1994 and 2009. As shown in Figure 3, in the shadow the Great Recession, the annual revenue cap was reduced to \$200 in each of the next two years. After a change of governors, the revenue cap was actually reduced in fiscal year 2012 by an average of \$554 per pupil.² In the following year, the revenue limit adjustment

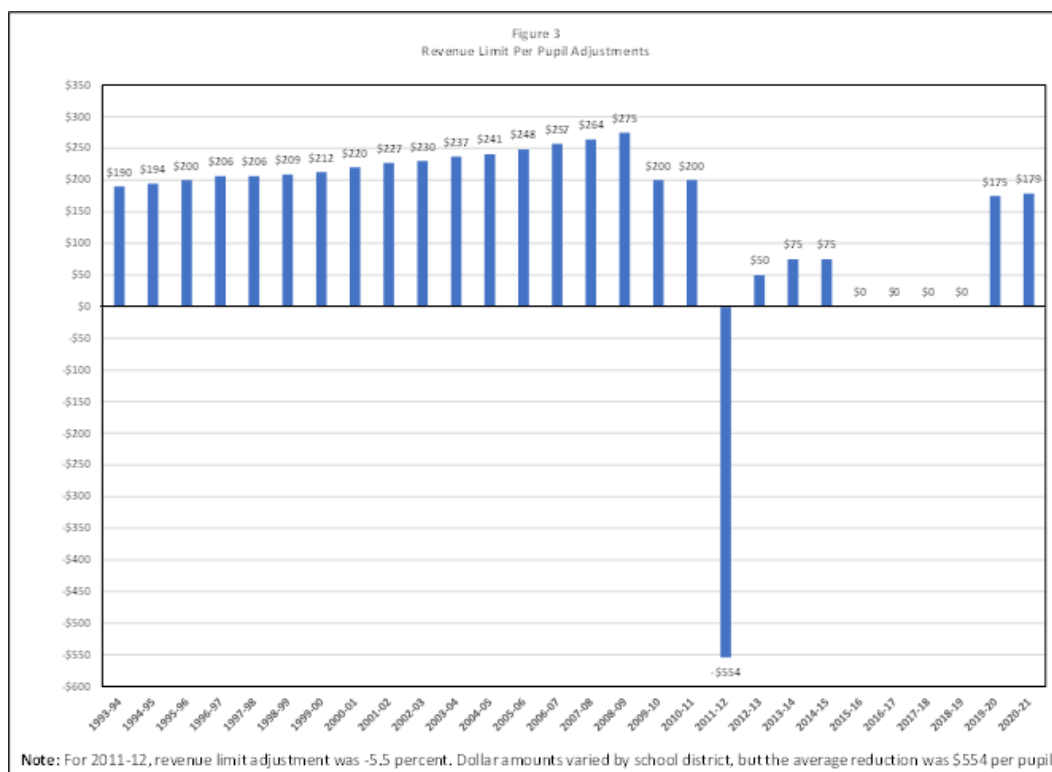
¹ The statutory definition of “two-thirds” includes two property tax credits that flow directly to taxpayers in the numerator (part of state education support) and excludes the credits, and revenues from categorical and federal aid from the denominator (Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 2019b).

² The statutory language mandated a 5.5% reduction in each school district’s per pupil revenue limit (Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, 2019a).

was set at \$50 per pupil. In fiscal years 2014 and 2015, the annual adjustment was \$75 and in the following four fiscal years revenue limits were frozen at their 2015 levels. The state’s 2019-2021 biennial budget set the annual revenue limit adjustments at \$175 and \$179.

To fully understand how revenue limits influence the role that the property tax plays in the funding of education, it is important to understand the interaction between annual changes in equalization aid and the annual adjustments in revenue limits. Because revenue limits are defined in terms of the sum of equalization aid and property taxes, whenever a school district’s per pupil aid is increased by more than the annual revenue limit adjustment, **every dollar of state aid above the limit must be offset by a dollar-for-dollar reduction in property tax levy.**

With the exception of 2005-06, in every year between 2001-02 and 2010-11, revenue limit adjustments were larger than per pupil increases in equalization aid. As a result, school districts were able to increase property tax funded



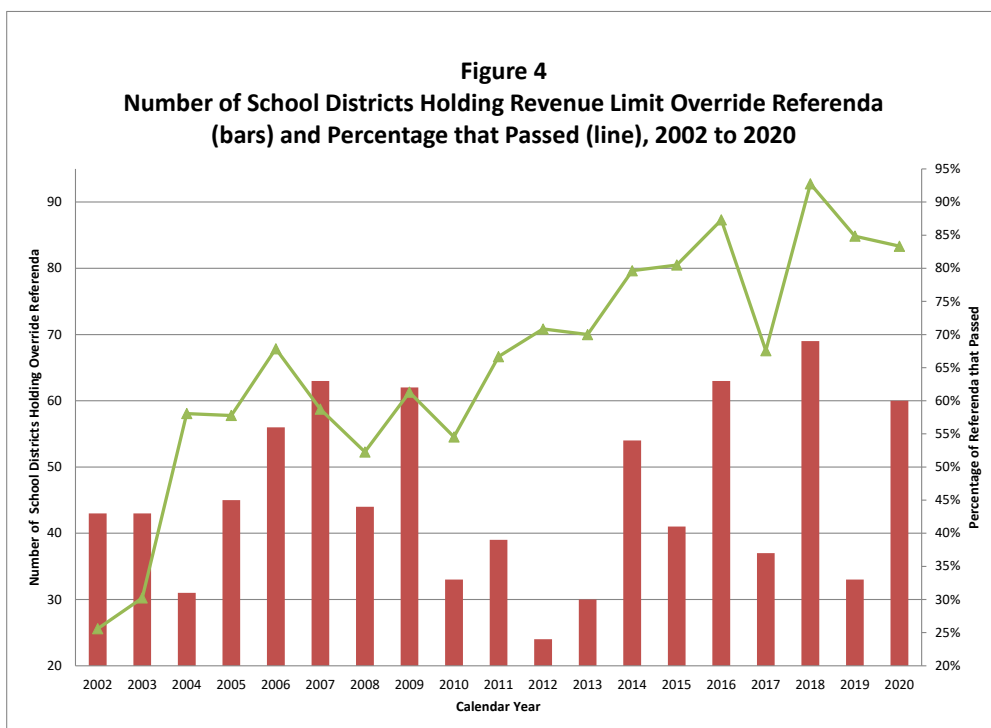
spending. In 2005-06, however, the increase in per pupil equalization aid was substantially higher than the revenue limit adjustment and hence, school districts were required to reduce their property tax levies to stay under their revenue limits, resulting in a reduction in the share of education revenues from the property tax in that year (see figure 2).

In early 2011, newly elected Governor Scott Walker introduced, and the legislature passed, Act 10. The legislation weakened the power of teacher unions and some other public sector unions by eliminating most of their collective bargaining rights, requiring annual union recertification votes, and prohibiting paycheck deductions for union dues. In addition, Act 10 reduced teacher compensation by requiring them to pay a larger share of the cost of their health care and pension benefits. The Governor justified a nearly 10% cut in equalization aid in the 2011-12 budget plus the negative revenue limit adjustment in the same year by arguing that Act 10 provided school districts with the “tools” they needed to cut spending.

Act 10 plus the near freezing of revenue limits over the next 6 years first stabilized and then reduced the role of the property tax in the funding of public education. In 2011-12 property tax revenues accounted for 42.9% of total K-12 revenues. By 2017-18 that figure was 41.9% (see Figure 2).

Revenue limits would have been even more effective in reducing property taxes if school districts did not have the option of holding referenda to override their revenue limits. School districts can propose “recurring” referenda, under which the revenue limit is permanently increased by a voter-approved dollar amount, or “non-recurring” referenda, which authorize specific dollar increases for one year or for a specified number of years.

Figure 4 presents data on the number of school districts that held one or more override referenda and on the percentage of school districts that were successful in overriding their revenue limits in the years between 2002 and 2020. The data show that as the per pupil revenue limits remained unchanged, rising



costs led an increasing number of school districts to hold referenda. The year with the highest number of school districts holding referenda was 2018, when 69 of the state’s 421 school districts attempted an override. The success rate reached an all-time high at 93%. With the exception of one year, since 2014 the pass rate has been over 80%.

It is important to note that 112 school districts (27%) have not held a single override referendum in the years between 2002 and 2020. Another 87 districts (21%) only held a single referendum during this period. The probability of holding referenda is similar for very small school districts with under 500 students as it is for larger urban districts, and the probability of holding referenda are not much different for property poor and property wealthy school districts. In a recent analysis, the Wisconsin Policy Forum (2020) showed that the support for override referenda is bipartisan. Of the 30 override referenda held on November 3, 2020, 25 passed, and in 15 of these 25 districts, the majority of voters cast their ballots for President Trump, in some cases by large margins.

Most Property Tax Relief is Untargeted?

Wisconsin provides property tax relief either by *targeting* property tax reductions to specific groups, such as homeowners, farmers, or low-income households, or by incentivizing or mandating that local governments, including school districts, reduce property tax rates. Lowering property tax rates provides equal percentage reductions in property tax liabilities to all owners of non-agricultural taxable property within a local jurisdiction. Because of a “uniformity clause” in the state constitution, a rate reduction generates equal *untargeted* property tax relief to homeowners, to owners of commercial-industrial property and to out-of-state owners of vacation homes.³

The primary way in which the school funding system provides untargeted property tax relief is by increasing general aid per pupil by an amount that is greater than the revenue limit adjustment. For example, in fiscal year 2017 the legislature increased general aid by \$108.3 million while not allowing any revenue limit increases. In that year 264 of the state’s school districts received a total of \$154 million more in equalization aid than they had received in the previous year. Given that the revenue caps remained unchanged, most of these districts were forced to reduce their property tax rates so that they would remain under their revenue limits.⁴

Over the years, the legislature has enacted a number of property tax credits. These credits either appear on taxpayers’ property tax bills or take the form of an income tax credit. Table 1 lists these credits and provides information on the annual amount of property tax relief provided by each credit in fiscal year 2018.

Table 1		
Wisconsin's Property Tax Credits		
Fiscal Year 2018 Budgeted Amounts		
Name	Type of Credit	Budgeted Amounts (in millions of dollars)
Untargeted Credits		
School Levy Credit	Reduces property tax rates	\$940.0
First Dollar Credit	On property tax bills	\$150.0
Targeted Credits		
Lottery and Gaming Credit	On property tax bills	\$171.0
School Property Tax/Rent Credit	Non-refundable income tax credit	\$483.7
Homestead Tax Credit	Refundable income tax credit	\$80.2
Veterans and Surviving Spouses Credit	Refundable income tax credit	\$29.8
Farmland Preservation Credit	Refundable income tax credit	\$16.3

Source: Wisconsin Department of Revenue, various reports. Available at <https://www.revenue.wi.gov/Pages/Report/Home.aspx>

Wisconsin taxpayers are eligible for two *untargeted* property tax credits—the School Levy Credit, and the First Dollar Credit. Although state expenditures on these credits are included in

³ The uniformity clause mandates that within each local jurisdiction, the same property tax rate must apply to all types of property, with the exception of agricultural property, which is provided with preferential treatment through a constitutional amendment.

⁴ Given the many years of low or zero revenue limit adjustments, it is not surprising that most school districts are constrained by their revenue limit. In fiscal year 2019, school district revenues were within 1% of their revenue limit in all but 26 school districts. While some of those districts may not have been forced to reduce their property tax levy, it is likely that they chose to use some of any increase in state aid to reduce property taxes.

the statutory definition of “state support” for education, neither credit provides school districts with any additional financial support for education.

The School Levy Credit was created in fiscal year 1986 and from then through 2006, the credit was budgeted at \$469.3 million per year. Since then annual funding for the credit has doubled to \$940 million. In contrast, between fiscal years 2006 and 2018, total direct state aid to school districts, general and categorical aids, increased by only 13.7%. The First Dollar Credit dates from 2008. Since 2010 it has been budgeted at \$150 million per year.

The annual budgeted amount of the School Levy Credit is allocated among all *municipal* governments in the state in proportion to each local government’s school property tax levy. Each municipal government’s allocation is then divided among all property owners in proportion to the assessed value of their property by reducing the school property tax rate. The state government then reimburses local school districts for their reduced property tax revenues. In an analysis of the School Levy Credit, Reschovsky (2010) estimated that only 51% of the credit was used to reduce the property taxes of Wisconsin homeowners on their primary residences. The remaining credits went to the owners of commercial-industrial property, farmland, the owners of residential rental property, and to both Wisconsin and out-of-state owners of vacation properties.

Each improved parcel of real estate in Wisconsin is entitled to a First Dollar Credit.⁵ The credit, which appears as a separate line item on each property tax bill, is calculated by multiplying the school district property tax rate by a *credit value*. In fiscal year 2019 the credit value was \$7,100 and the average credit was \$66. Each year, the credit value is calculated so that the resulting credits will not exceed the amount appropriated by the legislature (\$150 million in 2019).

Wisconsin provides additional property tax relief through three *targeted* tax credits. The Lottery and Gaming Tax Credit provides property tax relief to homeowners on their primary residences.⁶ Funded by a share of the proceeds of the state-operated lottery, the credit appears directly on eligible taxpayers’ property tax bill. The credit is calculated by multiplying each homeowners’ school property tax rate by a *lottery credit value*, which is determined each year by the funding available from the lottery proceeds. In fiscal year 2019, the credit value was \$17,000 and the average credit was \$116.

The other two targeted property tax relief measures are paid as income tax credits.⁷ The School Property Tax/Rent Credit is a non-refundable credit that is equal to 12% of the first \$2,500 in property taxes paid on a principal residence. Renters are also eligible for a credit. By statute, 25% of their rent (20% if heat is included in their rent) is considered to be a property tax payment. The Homestead Credit is a refundable “circuit breaker” that provides tax relief to low-income homeowners and renters facing high property tax liabilities relative to their incomes. Only

⁵ Unimproved parcels, usually land with no buildings, are ineligible for the credit.

⁶ In 1999, a constitutional amendment was approved that exempted the payment of targeted lottery credits from the constitution’s uniformity clause.

⁷ There are two additional refundable property tax related income tax credits, a credit for disabled veterans and surviving spouses, and a farmland preservation credit. These tax credits were utilized by relatively few taxpayers; in 2018 by 10,006 and 11,622 taxpayers, respectively.

taxpayers with incomes below \$24,680 (including income from non-taxable sources such as Social Security payments) are eligible for the credit.⁸ The maximum credit is \$1,168.

Political pressure to reduce property taxes comes primarily from homeowners. It is thus important to explore the cumulative impact of the state's property tax relief efforts on the property tax burdens on Wisconsin's homeowners. One way to measure the burden of the property tax on homeowners is to use data from the U.S. Census Bureau's *American Community Surveys* to calculate the ratio of the median property tax paid by homeowners to the median household income of homeowners. These data, which are available from 2010 through 2019, show that at 3/1%, the average property tax burden in the U.S. remained largely unchanged.⁹ While property tax burdens in Wisconsin are substantially higher than the national average, they fell from 5.0% in 2010 to 4.3% in 2019. Given the state's long-standing effort to reduce school property taxes, it is perhaps surprising that the tax burden on the median income homeowner remains so much higher (by 35%) than the U.S. average burden. A major reason is that policymakers in Wisconsin have chosen to distribute a substantial amount of property tax relief in an untargeted manner.

State Aid Formulas Fail to Address Persistent Educational Achievement Gaps

The goal of any public education system is to assure a quality education for every student. Defining quality education is inherently difficult. A good education provides students with specific skills, with knowledge about a wide range of subjects, and a set of socio-emotional capacities that allow them to function well in an ever-changing world (Brighthouse, et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, the assessment of education quality tends to focus on the attributes of education that are the easiest to measure, namely the acquisition of knowledge. Schools and school districts are evaluated through the use of standardized tests, often limited to reading and mathematics. Although it is widely recognized that standardized tests provide an imperfect and incomplete measure of students' cognitive knowledge and skills, they continue to play a central role in assessing student academic performance.

The U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) provides the only available means of comparing student academic performance across states. On average, Wisconsin student perform at about the national average level on the 4th grade mathematics and reading exams, and above the national average on the two 8th grade exams.

The NAEP results are much more troubling when one looks at the achievement gaps between white and Black students. In 2019, the average score of white students on both the 4th grade and 8th grade reading tests was 39 points higher than the average scores of Black students.¹⁰ The gap in scores between white and Black students on the mathematics tests was 37 and 47 points on the 4th and 8th grade tests, respectively. All of these achievement gaps are larger than the white-Black

⁸ Taxpayers below the age of 62 must have earned income in order qualify for the Homestead Credit.

⁹ This burden measure is based on all property tax payments of homeowners. For the country as a whole, in fiscal year 2018 local school property tax revenues accounted for about half of total property tax revenues.

¹⁰ All student performance data come from the interactive program available as part of the U.S. Department of Education, *The Nation's Report Card* website at www.nationsreportcard.gov/.

gaps in any other state; only the District of Columbia has larger gaps. Despite recent policy initiatives designed to reduce the racial achievement gap, the gaps reported in the 2019 NAEP are actually larger than the gaps in the 2011 NAEP.¹¹

Although the explanations for the persistent racial and economic achievement gaps are complex, one contributing factor is the way the state has chosen to finance public education. The core problem with Wisconsin's school funding system is that it largely fails to take account of differences across school districts in the amount of money per student needed to meet state-imposed standards for a high-quality education.

There is a substantial body of research that documents a set of reasons why some school districts require additional resources to achieve any specific educational goal. For example, more resources are needed to achieve improvements in academic performance of students from poor families, students in single-parent households, students with disabilities, and students entering school with limited English proficiency (Downes and Pogue, 1994; Duncombe and Yinger, 2005; Imazeki and Reschovsky, 2006). In Wisconsin, 108 of the state's 421 school districts have fewer than 500 students. There is evidence that small school districts cannot take advantage of economies of scale, and thus must spend more per student to provide quality education. Finally, school districts located in parts of the state with high costs of living, due primarily to high housing costs, must pay higher than average salaries to attract high-quality educators.

In fiscal year 2020, state aid to local school districts totaled \$6.1 billion. Nearly 80% of that amount is allocated through the state's general equalization aid formula. This highly complex three-tier formula is designed to reduce the link between school district per student property values and the amount of money they have available to fund education. The formula also works to encourage property-poor districts to increase per pupil spending and discourage property-rich districts from increasing their spending. Equalization aid is distributed through a *foundation aid* formula supplemented by a *guaranteed tax base* formula. The formula reduces aid to many school districts with above average per pupil property wealth that choose to increase education spending.

Research by Odden and Picus (2014) found that Wisconsin did a better job than most states in reducing the link between per pupil property wealth and school district revenue. Despite this fact, the formula takes absolutely no account of the factors listed above that are important in determining the per pupil resource needs of school districts. The equalization aid formulas used in most other states account for factors such as poverty and student disabilities using a system of student weights. For example, for purposes of the allocation of aid, each student from a poor family may count as 1.2 students and each student with a disability may count as 1.75 students. In this way, school districts with a high proportion of students from low-income families or with disabilities receive additional amounts of state aid.

¹¹ There are also achievement gaps based on family economic condition (as measured by eligibility for the National School Lunch Program). In Wisconsin, the 2019 economic achievement gaps for both 4th and 8th grade reading and mathematics are all slightly larger than the national averages.

An alternative way for providing additional funding to school districts that require extra resources is through the use of categorical grants designated for specific purposes. Wisconsin allocates state aid through more than 30 separate categorical aid programs. Significantly, revenue from categorical aid programs is outside of the revenue limits, and thus can be used to finance additional spending. Table 2 lists the budgeted fiscal year 2020 spending on Wisconsin's major grants programs and indicates the average annual rate of growth of these grant programs in the period from fiscal year 2011 through 2020.

Table 2
Budgeted School Aids by Type, Fiscal Year 2020
Average Annual Rate of Change, Fiscal Years 2011 to 2020

	Budgeted Amounts	Average Annual Rate of Change
General Aid		
Equalization Aid	\$4,740,048,000	0.2%
High Poverty Aid	\$16,830,000	-1.2%
Per Pupil Aid	\$621,924,800	46.7%
Categorical Aid (excl. per pupil aid)		
Regular and High Cost Special Education	\$459,630,000	0.6%
SAGE/Achievement Gap Reduction	\$109,184,500	0.0%
English Language Learners	\$8,589,800	-1.2%
Pupil Transportation Aid	\$24,000,000	-1.0%
Sparsity Aid	\$24,713,900	5.7%
All Other Categorical Aid	\$133,595,300	1.1%
Total Categorical	\$693,909,600	0.7%
Total State Aid	\$6,072,712,400	1.5%
Addendum:		
School Levy & 1st Dollar Credits	\$1,090,000,000	2.2%

The state's main grant program, equalization aid, grew very slowly--an average annual rate of 0.2%--over this period. A relatively small aid allocation is provided by the High Poverty Aid program, which targets aid to school districts in which over half of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches through the federal National School Lunch Program. Because this program is considered General Aid, the aid is subject to the revenue limits. Thus, the effect of this aid program is to reduce property tax levies in eligible school districts rather than providing them with additional educational resources.

The only categorical aid program targeted to students from low-income families is the Achievement Gap Reduction program (formerly known as SAGE). This categorical grant funds special programs and smaller class sizes in school districts with concentrations of low-income students but is restricted to educational initiatives occurring in kindergarten through third grade. Funding for this program has remained unchanged since fiscal year 2011. During this same period, the share of total public school students from poor families (as measured by eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch) rose from 41.4 to 46.5%.

Two thirds of all categorical aid is for special education. The aid partially reimburses school districts for spending on federally-mandated programs for students with a wide range of disabilities. In school year 2017-18, 13.8% of all Wisconsin students received special education services, with the share of school districts' special education enrollment ranging from 6 to 26%. Although

the number of students receiving special education services slightly declined over the past decade, total school district spending on special education continued to grow. Despite increases in the costs of special education, categorical aid for special education hardly changed during this period, with almost all the growth occurring between 2019 and 2020.

In 2002, a third of special education spending was reimbursed by state categorical aid. Since then, however, the state's contribution has been declining. In 2020, state aid only covered about a quarter of the total costs of special education. In addition to state aid, all school districts also receive federal grants in support of special education through the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). According to an analysis of data from the 2015-16 school year conducted by the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, state and federal aid only covered about 37% of the total \$1.6 billion that school districts spent on providing special education services (Pugh, 2018). The result was that over \$1 billion of special education costs had to be funded out of general school district revenues. As a consequence, school districts, especially those with a high proportion of students with disabilities, are forced to reduce course offerings, increase class sizes, or take other steps to reduce spending on their core educational programs.

By far the most significant change in the state's school funding policy since 2011 was the establishment of a per pupil aid program in fiscal year 2013. Per pupil aid is outside of the revenue limit and by definition its distribution is unrelated to the property wealth of school districts or to the range of factors, such as poverty, cost of living, or school district size, that reflect the expenditure needs of school districts. The funding for the per capita aid program has grown extremely rapidly—at an annual rate of nearly 47% since 2013. While the increase in per pupil aid provided school districts with needed revenue, the fact that it is completely untargeted means that it counteracts the positive tax-base equalization effects of general aid and does little to address Wisconsin's racial and economic achievement gaps.

The Way Forward

Over the past three decades, the Wisconsin legislature has implemented a set of policies designed to adequately and equitably fund public education while at the same time reducing the role that the property tax plays in school finance. The imposition of strict revenue limits and the expansion of property tax credits have been successful in reducing the share of total school revenues coming from the property tax from 53.4% in the 1992-93 school year to 41.9% in 2017-18. Despite this reduction, a larger share of education funding comes from the property tax in Wisconsin than in the average state.

In terms of the quality of public education, the evidence is decidedly mixed. Wisconsin students performed at the national average on the 4th and 8th grade reading exams that are part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and above average on the NAEP math tests. However, between 2011 and 2019, average NAEP scores of Wisconsin students have not improved, and in fact have declined on the 4th grade mathematics test. Furthermore, the achievement gaps between Black and white students are larger than the gaps in any other state, and the gaps have grown since 2011.

Addressing these issues will be difficult. Policymakers must design and implement a set of policies that simultaneously improve the overall quality of public education in the state, reduce the educational inequities that plague our current system, while also alleviating high property tax burdens faced by some Wisconsin homeowners and renters.

The analysis in this paper suggests a general strategy. Success will require the reform of the state education aid system, reforming the way the state limits school property taxes, and a reform of the current complex mix of property tax credits.

The economic, fiscal, and health implications of the Covid-19 pandemic create a new set of challenges for the funding of public education in Wisconsin. There is little doubt that the pandemic is exacerbating current racial and economic disparities and widening existing gaps in educational achievement. The need to operate well-ventilated classrooms that allow social distancing is placing additional fiscal pressures on school districts across the state. The need to effectively use limited state resources has never been more important. It is thus an opportune time to reform the way in which the state provides property tax relief and to reform the system of state aid for education.

It is inevitable that any reform of the state's system of school finance will lead to the redistribution of resources among school districts. Adjusting to changes in resources while maintaining or improving educational quality will be challenging. The experience of other states suggests that any reforms need to be carefully designed and any changes in school resources and in school property tax bills need to be phased in over several years.

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