

Sustaining Wisconsin

Informing citizens, empowering democracy

Sustaining Wisconsin (SW) is a COWS outreach program designed to bring Wisconsin residents the “real story” about important public-policy issues that affect their lives. Our goals? To provide ordinary citizens with the tools they need to challenge the official dogma, and to encourage broad participation in the decision-making process — both at the community level and across the state.

Inaugurated in January 2001, SW covers five major areas of public policy. *Jobs and the Economy* examines economic decline, economic inequality, and the lack of family-sustaining jobs. *Families and Communities* covers such concerns as the dearth of affordable housing and health care, and the state’s pervasive racial gap. *The Future* considers skewed state spending priorities that leave education — and other important public programs — behind. *Environment* includes problems like urban sprawl, and lingering threats to clean air and water. Finally, under *Democracy and Civic Participation*, we look at how ordinary people have been excluded from decision-making by state and local governments — the very problem SW seeks to address.

We launched SW nearly two years in advance of the November 2002 elections, when Wisconsinites were slated to elect a governor, attorney general, 99 state representatives, 17 state senators, and scores of local officials. We wanted to provide Wisconsin residents with a clearer understanding of the “state of our state” than the candidates would offer. And we hoped that, with this understanding, Wisconsinites could push would-be policy makers to think long term about the challenges facing the state — and to consider grassroots proposals for change.

To get the word out, we have fanned out all across Wisconsin to meet with local residents concerned about the future of their cities and their state. Using an easy-to-follow slide-show format, we have brought our message to a wide range of organizations, from service groups (like Rotary Clubs and Business and Professional Women’s Clubs), to county political party associations, to gatherings of city and county officials (including the League of Wisconsin Municipalities), to advocacy groups. In less than two years, we’ve made nearly 150 presentations to more than 8,300 people, traveling to 64 different cities in 38 of Wisconsin’s 72 counties.

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The Center on Wisconsin Strategy

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The Center on Wisconsin Strategy

In addition to our popular slide show, SW provides other resources for Wisconsin residents who want to stay informed. At our presentations, we provide written materials that cover our key themes in greater detail. We also direct participants to our website, where they can find an extensive collection of demographic data organized by county; reports on specific regions in Wisconsin; dozens of educational and policy-oriented papers that invite further action on particular problems; and tips on how to communicate with the media.

Our biweekly e-mail update, "Noos from the Field," goes out to nearly 1,200 community activists and local decision makers, more than 400 state legislators and staff, and more than 100 members of the Wisconsin media.

Through its program, SW has exposed such problems as the lack of "rainy-day" funds to help cope with the state's budget crisis, and the growing commitment to prisons as a model of economic growth. Armed with the informational tools that SW offers, Wisconsin residents are challenging their representatives to adopt "high road" policies and practices — such as promoting high-quality job creation, protecting our environment, and investing in education, housing, and health care instead of jails.

Now that the election is over, we are still deciding exactly what form SW will take. For now, we're proud to have influenced the debate over public policy, and to have fed thousands of Wisconsinites the critical information they need in order to help shape the future of our state.

From Wisconsin
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