



## COUNTY OF DANE

Department of Administration  
Room 425 City-County Building  
210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
Madison, WI 53703-3342

Shelby Slaven  
Director of Administration

Phone: (608) 266-4941  
Fax: (608) 266-4425 TTY WI Relay 711

Date: June 8, 2026

To: County Executive Melissa Agard

From: Shelby Slaven  
Director of Administration

Subject: Summary of Employee Engagement Survey – 2027 Budget Ideas

---

On April 17, 2026, the County Executive's Office sent out a survey to all Dane County staff requesting their input as the County Executive's Office begins preparations for the 2027 Budget. The survey was open-ended and intended to gather feedback on ideas for generating savings. There is value in hearing the experience and perspectives of County employees, and collaboration across the County is what we need in order to meet this tough budget.

The County Executive's Office requested a memo from the Department of Administration analyzing the results of that survey and summarizing common themes. This memo responds to that request. There were 368 employee responses, across all county departments and classifications. Along with providing an analysis of the major themes, this document includes examples of the themes directly quoted from the survey and also shares how the County will continue to consider, integrate, and respond to these ideas.

The first section of this memo covers the recurring feedback that the County may be working through or considering, and provides more information around how we can address them. The second section provides updates to the recurring feedback we received that had been incorporated to address the \$32 million deficit in our current 2026 budget.

### Most Submitted Feedback

In review, we identified five recurring themes that the County is working through or considering.

#### 1. Reduce management and supervisory positions

*"Cut some positions, especially in management. [...] The rate of people in management Vs regular employees is ridiculous and offensive in particular when we are talking about staying disciplined and making thoughtful decisions."*

*"An honest evaluation of the disproportionate number of management positions, particularly middle management, added to the county budget versus the frontline positions that actually provide services to Dane county residents."*

The County remains aware of the county-wide position growth we saw before 2025, the decrease of FTE in 2026, and how we continue to manage the workforce heading into 2027. From feedback we heard in the Budget Savings Survey, we think it's important to share more information on our current staffing and workforce.

From 2017 to now, the County as a whole added a net increase of 452 positions; this number includes the decrease of 31.50 FTE positions in the 2026 budget. 82% of the new positions added were non-manager positions. The 2026 Dane County budget has a total of 2,854.15 Full Time Employees (FTE). Of those FTE, the County has 396.00 FTE managers (including elected officials, WPPA Supervisors, and Department Heads). This equates to a workforce of 13.87% managers, and 86.13% non-manager staff.

The 2026 signed budget eliminated 31.5 FTE vacant positions to close the roughly \$32 million budget deficit. The table below shows the elimination of positions by group, and the percentage decrease within each classification. While most of those eliminated vacancies were in represented categories, the percentage makeup of our workforce, between managers and non-managers, remained roughly the same. Said differently, since our workforce is 86% non-managers, there will be and were more vacancies within non-manager classifications that could be eliminated to address the deficit to prevent any lay-offs. The alternative would have been to layoff managers from filled positions while retaining vacancies.

2025-2026 Position Changes				
Group	Budgeted 2025 FTE	Budgeted 2026 FTE	Net Change	Percentage Change
Attorneys	35.500	34.500	(1.000)	-2.8%
County Board Chair	1.000	1.000	-	0.0%
JC-705	139.500	142.600	3.100	2.2%
JC-720	797.350	772.950	(24.400)	-3.1%
JC-CONFIDNT	4.000	4.000	-	0.0%
LOCAL-65	251.300	252.300	1.000	0.4%
MGR-AGENTS	1.000	1.000	-	0.0%
Contract Managers (Dept Heads)	26.000	25.000	(1.000)	-3.8%
Elected Managers	6.000	6.000	-	0.0%
Managers - Professional	311.500	313.000	1.500	0.5%
Rep Professiona - 1871	415.150	397.450	(17.700)	-4.3%
SW-2634	328.900	328.000	(0.900)	-0.3%
Trades	19.000	21.000	2.000	10.5%
UPQHC-1199	83.450	86.350	2.900	3.5%
WPPA - Non-Supervisor	416.000	419.000	3.000	0.7%
WPPA -Supervisor	50.000	50.000	-	0.0%
Totals	2,885.65	2,854.15	(31.500)	-1.1%

## 2. Pause or reduce capital spending, remodeling, furniture, land purchases, and vehicles

*“STOP WASTEFULLY [...] REMODELING [...], STOP BUYING MORE FURNITURE UNLESS IT IS COMPLETELY WORN OUT WHY REPLACE IT. [...] THERE IS ALWAYS GOOD FURNITURE HEADED TO THE TRASH JUST BECAUSE YOU WANT IT DOESN'T MEAN YOU NEED IT.”*

*“SELL OR STOP RENTING/LEASING PROPERTY OR VEHICLES THAT ARE NOT NEEDED.”*

An important distinction when talking about an operating budget deficit is operating versus capital budgeting.

The Capital Budget funds support one-time projects and are primarily supported by borrowing and per state statute, cannot be utilized to offset or be applied to operating budgets. Capital funds are used for things like building, remodeling, construction, furniture and technology updates. Funds borrowed for capital projects can only be used for capital projects – this money cannot be shifted to operating budget items, and not utilizing previously borrowed funds to complete projects in the budget does not save us the money we need.

With that said, we hear this feedback and we agree. Now is not the time to pursue unnecessary and large capital projects and the County Executive has instructed all departments to “use extreme restraint when considering new capital projects.” We will still need capital projects to ensure our buildings, programs, and operations continue to run efficiently and safely, but we have an eye on restraint.

## 3. Review contracts, grants, programs, and outside spending for duplication or waste

*“CUT USELESS OR INEFFECTIVE CONTRACTS. ACTUALLY ASK THE EMPLOYEES NOT MANAGERS AND SUPERVISORS ABOUT THE CONTRACTS.”*

*CUTTING CONTRACTS THAT ARE NOT USED. [...] I'M SURE THERE ARE CONTRACTS THAT WE ARE NOT USING TO THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.”*

The County agrees with this perspective. In January of this year, the County Executive announced an initiative to comprehensively review Dane County contracting practices to “ensure taxpayer dollars are being spent wisely, efficiently, and transparently.” Since then, the Department of Administration has taken up this initiative. We are looking at county-wide contracting processes and policies in hopes we can better support Departments in pursuing and managing their contracts.

For 2027, the County Executive’s budget directions instruct Departments to review existing programs and services to ensure the County continues to meet the needs of the communities we serve. This is ongoing and nuanced work and we continue to lean in.

## 4. Consolidate office space, reduce buildings, sell lands and expand remote/hybrid work

*“Reduce the amount of spending on facilities...it appears that [...] space is significantly under-utilized. Multiple county buildings that I have visited in my employment appear very empty and I believe if space is consolidated there could be a significant cost savings.”*

*“Sell unnecessary office space. Close offices. Cut the operating costs of having so many open buildings.”*

The County hears this feedback and is taking action. In October 2025, County Executive Agard announced an initiative to review and evaluate County assets, leases, and land. Led by the Department of Administration, this review is underway and we continue to assess utilization of our workspaces, our need for space, underutilized leases, and how we can move forward with efficiency and with an eye on fiscal responsibility. This could mean selling buildings in the future, non-renewal of leases, and shifting how employees continue to work and serve our community.

We continue to catalogue lands gifted to us or purchased with funds that require we protect community spaces for years to come. The County owns thousands of acres dedicated to parks and natural resource areas. These lands were acquired over several decades through a combination of County borrowing and state and federal funds to provide recreational opportunities, preserve natural resources, and protect those benefits for our current community and future generations.

Many of the state and federal grants used to support these acquisitions included conditions requiring that the lands remain in public ownership, or otherwise remain available for public use, consistent with the purposes of the grant programs. The County’s local share was often financed through 20-year borrowing, and many of those bonds remain outstanding and continue to be repaid with taxpayer dollars.

Proposals are sometimes made to sell these lands to help close a one-year operating deficit or avoid short-term operating adjustments; converting a long-term public asset into a one-time budget fix. It could also leave residents continuing to repay debt issued to acquire lands that the public no longer owns or can use. Selling these lands for short-term fiscal relief would undermine the purpose for which they were acquired and would impact future generations.

## 5. Changes to health insurance

*“Have employees pay something for health insurance. It is the best coverage in the state; we would be hard pressed to find better anywhere else. [...] We have the top pay or even the highest paid employees in almost every department county-wide, most would be hard pressed to find similar pay, time off, and insurance as good as ours that is 00% employer paid in the private or public sector.*

*“Many people I have spoken with would rather pay something for their premium, than receive a pay decrease, as wages effect retirement and social security.”*

*“It is an unpopular option, but negotiating with our health insurance carrier to incorporate a modest premium and slight increase in copays and deductibles (not what was initially proposed last year as an option) could result in significant savings. If a slight increase in premium, copay, or deductible can help avoid employees taking another pay cut, it is worth exploring.*

Insurance coverage is deeply personal and tied to our most basic of needs – how we continue to take care of ourselves so we can show up for our families, our futures, and our work. This is evident in the responses we received in this survey. Roughly 53 responses indicated some support for making health care changes as expressed in the comments above. An additional 16 responses were more nuanced in

the changes they would to see made to the health insurance plan, suggesting changes like a high-deductible plan, asking the HMO plan to pay a premium, or offering a cash-out option if an employee declines health-insurance. Others were directly opposed to any changes to changes to health insurance, with at least 12 clear responses in that direction. Still others mentioned health insurance and their responses elude easy categorization and others mention health insurance as a discussion as a part of another solution, without directly commenting on health insurance.

We realize that approaching and proposing changes to these benefits is also deeply personal and we do not take that lightly. This year, in preparation of the 2027 budget, County Executive Agard wrote to the Employee-Management Insurance Advisory Committee (IAC) on March 10, 2026 and March 12, 2026 to request that the Committee consider plan design changes. On April 16, DOA wrote to IAC, notifying the committee of the timeframes to approach Dean with any potential savings options and a desire to bring those savings options back to the IAC for input and feedback.

At the May 15, 2026, IAC meeting, the committee shared items they would like to be calculated for savings by Dean Healthcare. DOA consolidated and sent these requests to Dean for consideration and analysis. The Department believe these options and associated savings will be available for presentation at the June 10, 2026 IAC meeting.

In addition, over the course of this year, IAC has been investigating systems and structures that exist in the Healthcare sector to determine if there are alternative ways of procuring health insurance for the County under the next healthcare RFP in late 2027.

## Updates to Feedback that has been Implemented

There were three major themes where the County has already incorporated commonly provided ideas. Many of these initiatives were implemented for the 2026 budget and we have updated associated savings of these initiatives below.

### 1. Hiring freezes, vacancy management, and eliminating unnecessary positions

*"I support many of the chosen cost-cutting measures: hiring freezes, modest budget cuts across the county, no new positions. It makes sense to not grow when we can't afford it."*

*"Given that personnel costs represent a significant portion of the County's budget, continued focus on strategic workforce management is critical. This could include enhanced vacancy review processes, prioritization of critical roles, and exploration of shared services for administrative, data, and grant management functions."*

Dane County is currently under a hiring freeze, with limited exemptions under the APM. For non-exempt positions, Department Heads must submit a request to unfreeze a position to be filled. Not every vacancy is put forward for an exception. At a very high level for 2026, and as presented at the June 1, 2026 Personnel and Finance Committee meeting, there have been roughly 216 freeze appeal requests submitted for consideration. 60 of these are exempt FTE positions and approved, 60 are FTE, and 96 are LTE. Of the 120 requests to fill FTE positions, 13 are managerial and 107 are non-managerial; 89.16% of the requested FTE positions to be filled are employee-group eligible. The table below shares additional information on FTE freeze appeals.

FTE Freeze Appeal Requests		
Position Type	Requested	EG Eligible
Exempt FTE	60	56
FTE	60	51
Total	120	107

In total, the Q1 vacancy rate for 2026 is 6.9%. As a comparison, the county vacancy rate at the end of Quarter 1 in 2025 was 5.8%; the average vacancy rate since between 2021 and 2026 at PP11 is 7.2%.

For the 2026 budget, the County budgeted a savings of \$7,606,779 through vacancies. As of PP09, the County has realized \$7,589,058 in savings from vacancies. As a result of the hiring freeze, the County has almost realized equaled an entire year’s worth of saving in the first nine (9) pay periods of the year if those vacancies remain through the end of the year. While this is a positive, we will not know the true savings amount until the end of the year and we are able to also take into consideration increased overtime due to decreased teams.

As Departments move into developing and proposing their budget to the County Executive, there is an eye on how we hire, staff, and manage our workforce. We will continue to operate under a hiring freeze, prioritizing vacancies that are necessary to operations, and pursue ways to provide services with fewer resources and alternative structures.

## 2. Temporary wage reductions, furloughs, or voluntary unpaid time off

*“Continue “furlough” or the 1% pay cut. We do not want to change our insurance, that is the most important thing.”*

*“Voluntary unpaid leave time. I think the folks who take more than their fair share of time off at the counties expense would jump at a chance to take advantage of this option.”*

The 1% wage reduction for 2026 created a targeted savings amount of \$2 million dollars towards the operating deficit.

To realize additional savings, the County encouraged an increased use of Voluntary Leave Without Pay (VLWOP). At the end of Quarter 1, March 31, 2026, the County had realized \$95,000 in savings. If all currently approved VLWOP is taken, the County could realize approximately \$442,000 in savings by the end of the year.

## 3. Early Retirement incentives

*“Continue to offer retirement incentives and hold those positions vacant.”*

*“Increase retirement incentives, better than the incentive this past few months.”*

Under the 2026 retirement incentive, County employees who separated by April 4, 2026, were given an additional 6% in their sick and holiday banks. At the end of Quarter 1, March 31, 2026, 44 County employees had retired from service. As a comparison, at the same point in 2025, the County had 22 retirements. We will report savings accrued through retirements that occurred between the end of Quarter 1 and the final separation date of April 4, 2026 in a Quarter 2 update after June 30, 2026.

As a note, retirement incentives only produce savings if the position is not filled. Pay outs at retirement of certain banks decrease the monetary savings in the short term, especially if the position goes on to be filled.

## Summary

Across the comments, the dominant pattern is that employees generally favor administrative streamlining, facility consolidation, and nonessential spending reductions before deeper cuts to frontline staff or layoffs. Many employees showed willingness to accept limited shared sacrifice, like small wage reductions, furloughs, or health insurance cost-sharing, especially if those steps help preserve jobs for the future.

The budget process is long and involves different stakeholders at every step, and under ongoing operating budget deficits, it is top of mind for all of us. To become more familiar with the process, a helpful guide can be found here: [Annual Budget Process](#).

We will continue to find ways to share information and solicit feedback and input. We appreciate the continued passion and commitment you have to the service of our community and to each other.