

# WISCONSIN COUNTIES



WISCONSINEYE  
CELEBRATES 10TH ANNIVERSARY



# COVER FEATURES



**WISCONSINEYE**  
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# MAKING & DOCUMENTING HISTORY FOR TEN YEARS

—Michelle Gormican Thompson, *Thompson Communications*

It had been six years since WisconsinEye was created by a joint legislative committee back in 1999. Countless meetings had occurred with legislators, officials, and the State Capitol & Executive Residence Board to get the ball rolling on this innovative C-Span-like entity that would broadcast Wisconsin government statewide. Donations of phone service, computers, software, office space, legal work, graphic design, engineering, and printing were made by Wisconsin companies of all sizes.

At the time touting “gavel-to-gavel coverage,” this new network featured high-tech remote control cameras from hearing rooms and legislative chambers, connected by literally miles of cable under Madison streets from the Capitol Building to the WisconsinEye offices a block off the Square.

Coverage protocols were ironed out, cable negotiations were complete, and a huge fundraiser had been held with featured guest Walter Cronkite. After all, this daunting endeavor would take no state money, it was a 501c3 organization and would be entirely funded by the private sector. To say it was a long road is an understatement.

Then, in 2005, it all came to a standstill. It was a pivotal point where, quite frankly, money had almost run out. Jon Henkes, former press secretary to Governor Tommy Thompson, had been there from the beginning. He went home and had a difficult conversation with his wife: there may be no paycheck this month.

“I came up with a list of influential individuals and set up meetings with them. It was time to think outside the box,” said President and CEO of WisconsinEye Jon Henkes. “I had a meeting with Wisconsin businessman Terry Kohler and right away, he was not interested. It was an uncomfortable exchange and I left soon after it began.”

Henkes went back to his car and sat in the parking lot, thinking about his next steps. “I thought about all the work that had been done and the future. I couldn’t just leave, so I walked back in and he agreed to see me again with one caveat: I had five minutes. He even set a timer.”

The five minutes turned into 90 pivotal minutes as Jon shared with him the vision and passion behind WisconsinEye. When Jon got back to his car for the second time, he took with him a commitment for al-

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over 706  
HOURS  
of coverage in  
2016

# COVER FEATURES



most \$1 million from the Charlotte & Walter Kohler Charitable Trust. It was the turning point for the young public affairs broadcasting network.

“The support of the Kohler Trust laid the groundwork for the charitable foundation gifts that continue to this day,” said Henkes. “We have had support from the Bradley Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, Ken and Diane Hendricks of Beloit, and the Argosy Foundation, the charitable trust of Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele’s family. Because of this generosity, we were able to get off the ground and today, thrive.”

## JOINT FINANCE AND THE DALI LAMA

On May 3, 2007, WisconsinEye went live for the first time. Coverage included the Joint Committee on Finance and the Dali Lama, who appeared at the Kohl Center in Madison the next day.

The network has broadcast continuously since that day, providing free and full access to the actions of the Legislature, State Supreme Court, activities of the Governor’s office, public meetings, and much, much more.

Today, WisconsinEye has evolved to include programming beyond just the “gavel-to-gavel” coverage. This evolution has led to innovative partnerships. In-depth specials on topics like “Dealing with Dementia” have garnered accolades and awards.

This past election cycle, WisconsinEye launched a proprietary video player featuring interviews with nearly every candidate running for office. WisconsinEye garnered support from a wide variety of private partners, including the Wisconsin Counties Association, in order to provide a unique programming opportunity to its viewers, as well as the voters.

“We have tried to create a mix of sponsors,” said Henkes. “The result has given us the opportunity to look closer at important topics. Currently, we are working on a multi-part series on the impact of heroin and opioids in the state. We raised \$180,000 to get these shows into high school classrooms. This partnership is just one example of what we are doing to continually innovate and bring relevant programming to Wisconsin citizens.”

## WISCONSIN TRADITION OF FULL AND PUBLIC ACCESS

This innovative approach to funding is important because of all similar government affairs networks nationwide, WisconsinEye is the only one that is not funded in part or in whole by the state.

“We are the only private network of this type in the country,” said Henkes. “Each time we gather with our peers from around the country, they tell us they wish they could do what we do.”



He continued, “For example, in the midst of heavy legislative floor debate in other states, crews have been instructed to turn off their cameras. Being privately funded has given us the opportunity to present fair and unbiased coverage of everything, not just bits and pieces.”

Henkes is quick to give credit to Wisconsin legislators both past and present when discussing WisconsinEye. “When fundraising, this is the most important point I always share. They deserve the credit for being willing to open up with what they do, it’s been their vision all along to share open government. We work in partnership with elected officials and we greatly value their input.”

## A PROFOUND RESPONSIBILITY

This mission is the driving force behind the WisconsinEye eight-person board of directors (see page 31). This governing body is bipartisan to ensure that WisconsinEye achieves its mission to provide nonpartisan coverage of state government and public policy discussion. As a matter of board policy, neither the board nor any individual board member has any involvement in the network’s daily operations or programming decisions.

When the joint legislative committee gathered back in the late 90s, they may or may not have been fully aware of the huge impact WisconsinEye would have on the history of our state. In its archive, WisconsinEye has video and audio of all floor proceedings, many committee hearings, and interviews with people who are no longer governing or no longer with us. All of this footage is readily accessible to any Wisconsin citizen or interested party on their website, [www.wiseye.org](http://www.wiseye.org).



During 2011’s Act 10 debates and the protests that ensued, WisconsinEye was there for it all. They covered every minute of the 66-hour Assembly floor session when the bill was passed. When a call came in from Al-Jazeera, they were reminded that the WisconsinEye Network was truly reaching every corner of not just Wisconsin, but the world.

“Wisconsin doesn’t have any sort of written transcription of legislative happenings,” said Henkes. “We are the official record, and this is a profound responsibility we are privileged to be a part of here in the state.”

## GET BEHIND THE MISSION

When Jon Henkes stood up to leave that fateful meeting back in 2005, Terry Kohler reached into his desk and gave Jon an empty hand grenade. This symbol of hard work and determination to get behind a mission, as Terry described it to him, stays close by Jon today.

“The entire WisconsinEye team is made up of nine people. They are passionate, dedicated, and professional individuals who check their political views at the door,” he said. “We’d fall on a grenade for our mission and we take this responsibility very seriously. We are honored to be a part of Wisconsin’s history in the making.”



## 10 YEARS COVERING WISCONSIN GOVERNMENT & LOCAL COMMUNITIES

—WisconsinEye Network, [www.wiseye.org](http://www.wiseye.org)

If you have been paying close attention to Wisconsin politics, you have probably watched WisconsinEye. Since 2007, WisconsinEye's remote cameras at the State Capitol have been filming the actions of the Legislature in gavel-to-gavel coverage. This year, WisconsinEye is celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a network. For 10 years the primary mission has stayed the same — *to provide unfettered access to the actions of our state* — not just to those who are directly involved, but to every resident of Wisconsin.

The network has grown and expanded over the last 10 years, establishing itself as a true embodiment of the Wisconsin ideal through its commitment to Wisconsin's communities and citizens. Time and time again, WisconsinEye's footage has been used by local, national, and international news agencies to give context to the most important issues the state and the nation have faced over the last decade.

WisconsinEye's coverage is available to everyone, on cable and online, free of charge. WisconsinEye's goal is to give citizens access to the actions of the Legislature without biased commentary or opinions. Further, WisconsinEye remains nonpartisan, refusing to accept state funding, which might interfere with delivering balanced reporting.

While WisconsinEye has often been referred to as the C-SPAN of Wisconsin, the network also has made an effort to differentiate itself by developing programs that speak to the concerns of Wisconsin residents.

During the 2016 election cycle, WisconsinEye interviewed over 90% of the candidates running for state and federal office. Including 245 interviews, WisconsinEye staff traveled across the state of Wisconsin to give candidates the opportunity to be heard. WisconsinEye's staff covered campaign rallies for all parties — left, right, independent.

WisconsinEye extended its reach by partnering with *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and Gannett Wisconsin to develop a campaign video player. These partnerships made it easier for viewers to watch election coverage, as well as provided local news networks the opportunity to host WisconsinEye content on their websites. The number one priority was to ensure that voters had easy access to unbiased reporting that could help inform their vote.



In the past year alone, WisconsinEye filmed over 700 hours of total coverage – enough footage to play nonstop for 30 days. Additionally, the network has an archive containing over 8,000 hours of video footage from the 10 years it has been in operation – 10 years of Wisconsin history representing well-over 6,500 programs. The video archive is available on WisconsinEye’s website to anyone who wants to watch at absolutely no cost. For anyone with an interest in state government, the state of Wisconsin, or is a history buff, this video archive is a gold mine. WisconsinEye is proud that the archive is an example of the network’s continued commitment and dedication to its mission and to the people of Wisconsin.

WisconsinEye continually looks for ways to expand its programming in order to address the needs and concerns of the people of Wisconsin. Last year, WisconsinEye launched an award-winning documentary series, *Dealing with Dementia*, to raise awareness about the signs and symptoms of the disease, give a voice to those affected, and provide hope and support to those dealing with this disease. During the Alzheimer’s Association’s annual meeting in October, Senior Producer Steve Walters was honored with the 2016 Excellence in Journalism award for his work on this program.

This past November, in honor of Veterans Day, the network partnered with the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSO) on a seven-part series focused on

helping veterans better understand veterans’ benefits. With over 30% of veterans unaware of the benefits available to them, this series was a much-needed resource. WisconsinEye identified that need and stepped up to help make an impact.

The momentum generated by successful programs like these has carried WisconsinEye into its anniversary year. This spring, WisconsinEye will release a new documentary showing the affects heroin and opioids have on teens growing up in Wisconsin. Working closely with Wisconsin teachers, WisconsinEye will also produce a civics-based initiative designed to help educators engage students in state government. The program will include free customizable lesson plans, complimentary videos, and other tools that fully meet state education standards, in order to give young people a better understanding of the state’s legislative processes.

Over the past decade, WisconsinEye has proven that it will not only deliver on its promise to provide the evenhanded, gavel-to-gavel coverage the viewers have come to appreciate, but it will go above and beyond to create invaluable programs that speak to the hearts and minds of the people of Wisconsin – all without losing sight of its mission. The need for reliable, unbiased news sources is at an all-time high and WisconsinEye will be there, covering all sides of the issues and giving everyone a voice, as they have for the last 10 years.

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NONPARTISAN  
REFUSING TO ACCEPT STATE FUNDING,  
WHICH MIGHT INTERFERE WITH  
DELIVERING BALANCED REPORTING.**





## THE IMPORTANCE OF WISCONSINEYE

—Wisconsin State Representative John Nygren

One of the most important parts of the legislative process is public accessibility and opportunities for input. During my time serving in the Legislature, accessibility has increased tenfold. With the widespread usage of social media, there are more ways for Wisconsinites' voices to be heard than ever before. That said, there has been one constant service that has provided premier accessibility to our state's legislative process for Wisconsin residents, stakeholders, advocacy groups, my colleagues in the Legislature, and interested individuals across

the country: WisconsinEye.

As Assembly Co-Chair of the budget-writing Joint Finance Committee (JFC), I understand the importance of public input. Whether my fellow JFC members and I are traveling the state for public hearings or we are holding executive sessions on an important state issue, we strive for the public to have access to the proceedings that take place. WisconsinEye is one of the best ways for interested folks to tune in and be a part of the action. Even far away from Madison, WisconsinEye is there to provide access for people to live stream events taking place at the State Capitol.

Additionally, WisconsinEye has always been a great curator of archived video feeds. For research purposes, it is always convenient to look back on the WisconsinEye webpage and search through previously recorded tapes. When my colleagues and I are working on important issues, like prioritizing public education and safeguarding Wisconsin drivers, it is always helpful to go back and watch what experts have said about various issues in the past.

Currently, I serve as Co-Chair of the Governor's Task Force on Opioid Abuse with Lt. Governor Kleefisch and the rest of the task force members. We have made



**I AM THANKFUL THAT WISCONSINEYE OFFERS ITS SERVICES TO THE STATE LEGISLATURE AND ALL WISCONSIN RESIDENTS.**



an effort to hold our meetings in locations across the state to promote accessibility for members of different communities to attend and share their experiences. WisconsinEye has also made an effort to expand the outreach of the task force by attending, live streaming, and archiving our meetings. Because of their work, our conversations with addiction and recovery experts have been able to reach so many more individuals.

In short, I am thankful that WisconsinEye offers its services to the state Legislature and all Wisconsin residents. Efforts like these help Wisconsin residents connect with state government and their legislators, and I believe these open lines of communications are paramount for a successful governing structure. I look forward to continuing our partnership with WisconsinEye as we start the 2017-19 Legislative Session.



## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The WisconsinEye board of directors is a bipartisan governing body so constituted to ensure that WisconsinEye achieves its mission to provide nonpartisan coverage of state government and public policy discussion. As a matter of board policy, neither the board nor any individual board member has any involvement in the network's daily operations or programming decisions.

### CHAIR

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*Meyer Consulting, LLC*

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