



Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance

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NEWS

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Wisconsin County Boards Start to Shrink WISTAX Examines County Board Downsizing

MADISON—Since the passage of a 2006 state law allowing voters to reduce the size of their county boards, more than 10% of Wisconsin's boards have downsized. With many of the nation's largest boards, the Badger State has become a battleground over what board size is appropriate.

According to a new Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (WISTAX) report, county boards across the state have felt pressure to eliminate supervisors since the passage of 2005 Act 100. The law allows boards to be downsized once between each decennial census, either by board action or by citizen referendum.

Since Act 100 gave voters this new power, county board size has become an increasingly divisive issue. A referendum in Douglas County that would have reduced board size from 28 seats to seven received 49.9% support, failing by just 18 votes. If it had passed, the 75% reduction would have been the largest in recent state history, according to WISTAX.

There have been nine referenda to downsize county boards in the year since the law passed. Five of these—in Fond du Lac, Price, Walworth, Waushara, and Wood counties—were successful. The largest reduction in board members was 19 (38 seats to 19) in Wood, while the biggest percentage drop was 56% (25 to 11) in Walworth. Walworth's reduction passed in the recent April election, while the other four were approved in the 2006 fall election.

Another impact of the law was that it spurred some counties to downsize on their own. Because Act 100 allowed for only one reduction between censuses, four county boards—in Green Lake, Sheboygan, Waukesha, and Winnebago—acted to cut their board sizes before referendum efforts could lead to larger reductions. The most interesting cases occurred in Green Lake (21 to 19) and Winnebago (38 to 36), where board members voted to trim two positions in order to preemptively prevent larger cuts from voters.

In addition to showing the effects of Act 100, the WISTAX study explains how voters put a referendum on the ballot. Proponents must collect signatures equal to at least 25% of the number of votes cast during the most recent county supervisor election. If the petition is approved, the referendum is placed on the ballot during the next April or November election.

The study also addresses the future of this contentious issue. The number of referenda is expected to fall with the approach of the 2010 census, but there could be another surge early in the next decade.

For a free copy of *The Wisconsin Taxpayer* containing the article "County Board Reductions," write to WISTAX, 401 North Lawn Ave., Madison, WI 53704-5033; e-mail wistax@wistax.org; visit www.wistax.org; or phone 608.241.9789. □

(Editor's Note: An electronic version of this release is available at www.wistax.org.)

The Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, founded in 1932, is the state's oldest and most respected private government-research organization. Through its research, publications, civic lectures, and school talks, WISTAX aims to improve Wisconsin government through citizen education. Nonprofit, nonpartisan, and independently funded, WISTAX is not affiliated with any group—national, state, or local—and receives no government support.