**Fiscal Facts: Partnerships Could Help Address Milwaukee County Parks’ Unmet Needs**

While the massive unmet capital and maintenance needs facing the Milwaukee County Parks will require a variety of far-reaching solutions, one strategy that county leaders could immediately pursue is partnering with municipalities and other local governments.

The Wisconsin Policy Forum has long documented the myriad challenges facing Milwaukee County Parks. They include declining property tax support, shrinking workforce, growing reliance on earned revenues such as concession sales, and a huge mounting backlog of capital needs.

Milwaukee County owns 142 parks and other sites, 12 parkways, 184 miles of trails, which adds up to roughly 10 percent of all land in the county. An estimate found the system’s unmet capital needs over a 25-year period to be about $417 million in 2020 dollars, or about $496 million today – without including the considerable needs of the Mitchell Park Domes.

Our research also documented a decline of 51% from 1989 to 2019 in inflation-adjusted operations spending for parks. The system has become more reliant on generating revenue from admissions and concessions fees; this trend has increased pressure to keep those assets in good repair, limiting funding to maintain the rest of the system.

Most recently, there have been bright spots: the county’s new additional 0.4% percent sales tax is helping to fund a $3 million increase in the county parks operating budget this year. The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) also funded $17.4 million in parks capital projects. While helpful, these developments still leave many hurdles remaining.

The parks already have been strengthened by partnerships in recent decades, but building on them will likely involve taking new steps to maximize mutual benefits. For example, Milwaukee County may need to give greater say about parks uses to municipalities, whose local financing tools in turn could be used to help improve parks infrastructure and amenities.

Parks leaders also could develop clearer guidelines for collaboration with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD), which has strong flood management interests in several county parks and could partner more extensively on capital projects that would benefit both parties.

These concepts already have been put into practice in some cases by parks officials. But they may be difficult for them to implement on a wider scale without funding for additional staff and a shared vision from elected county leaders.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*