



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE
P.O. BOX 8952 • MADISON, WI 53708

Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs

Assembly Bill 250

Representative Tony Kurtz and Senator Eric Wimberger

Good morning. Thank you, Chairman Penterman for having this hearing today.

Assembly Bill 250 would provide state funds to help create a preservation fund for the War Memorial Center, a private non-profit organized under Section 45.75 of the Wisconsin Statutes and tasked with operating and maintaining the War Memorial Center and memorials under its care.

The War Memorial Center is Wisconsin's most visible and enduring tribute to the State's Veterans, but it faces significant financial challenges to its continued operations. With its important role in supporting Veterans and their families statewide continuing to grow, AB-250 would provide \$9 million in State support, which will be matched by \$9 million in private sector support.

Annual maintenance costs for the interior of the 67-year-old landmark facility and memorials exceed \$800,000. The War Memorial Center's total \$2.6 million annual operating budget is funded by a combination of earned revenue from parking and private events (40%), private donations (40%), and support from Milwaukee County (20%). However, Milwaukee County's annual contribution will sunset over the next decade.

The preservation fund for the War Memorial would generate earnings to cover the annual maintenance costs, capital repairs, and improvements, and the funds for the Vietnam Memorial would cover needed capital repairs and improvements and generate earnings for the long-term maintenance of this striking tribute to Wisconsin's 57,000 Vietnam Veterans.

Originally conceived by community leaders after World War II, the War Memorial Center stands as Milwaukee's first significant piece of modern architecture, designed by the renowned Eero Saarinen, creator of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. The War Memorial Center is more than just a historic building; it is a living tribute to the service and sacrifice of Wisconsin's Veterans. The War Memorial continues to expand its impact through programs that address critical issues like mental health and education, reaching over 184,000 Wisconsin Veterans and 56,000 students across the State each year.

Located on the shores of Lake Michigan, this public space is open seven days a week, offering free access for all to honor Wisconsin's heroes and reflect on their service and sacrifice. With the necessary public/private investments, this site will continue to honor our Veterans for generations to come.

We are joined today by the War Memorial Center and several Veterans groups who support this project who can speak to specifics and the importance of this project. We appreciate the opportunity to testify about this bill today and are happy to answer any questions you may have.



War Memorial Center

750 North Lincoln Memorial Drive ~ Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202

Phone: 414-273-5533 ~ www.warmemorialcenter.org

April 21, 2025

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RE: Request for State Funding to Preserve the War Memorial Center

We are writing today to urge you to support a \$9 million investment by the State of Wisconsin to help create a preservation fund for the War Memorial Center (Center), a private non-profit organized under Section 45.75 of the Wisconsin Statutes and tasked with operating and maintaining the Center and memorials under its care. Annual maintenance costs for the interior of the 67-year-old landmark facility and memorials exceed \$800,000. The Center's total \$2.6 million annual operating budget is funded by a combination of earned revenue from parking and private events (40%), private donations (40%), and support from Milwaukee County (20%). Milwaukee County's annual contribution will sunset over the next decade. The War Memorial Center is Wisconsin's most visible and enduring tribute to the State's Veterans, but it faces significant financial challenges to its continued operations. With the Center's important role in supporting Veterans and their families statewide continuing to grow, we are seeking \$9 million in State support, which will be matched by \$9 million in private sector funds.

A preservation fund is urgently needed to ensure the long-term viability of this iconic landmark. \$9 million from State funds would be complimented by \$9 million in private donations currently sought by the War Memorial Center comprised of \$7 million for the preservation fund and \$2 million for the adjacent Vietnam Memorial under its care. The preservation fund for the War Memorial would generate earnings to cover the annual maintenance costs, capital repairs, and improvements of this iconic tribute to Wisconsin's Veterans, and the funds for the Vietnam Memorial would cover needed capital repairs and improvements and generate earnings for the long-term maintenance of this striking tribute to Wisconsin's 57,000 Vietnam Veterans. The State's support will ensure that this iconic structure and the critical services it provides continue to serve Wisconsin's Veterans and their families for generations to come.

The War Memorial Center is more than just a historic building; it is a living tribute to the service and sacrifice of Wisconsin's Veterans. Originally conceived by community leaders after World War II, the War Memorial Center stands as Milwaukee's first significant piece of modern architecture, designed by renowned architect Eero Saarinen, creator of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. For decades, the War Memorial Center has honored the sacrifices of Wisconsin Veterans, while also expanding its impact through programs that address critical issues like mental health and education, reaching over 184,000 annual visitors and 56,000 students across the State each year. The public-private partnership with Milwaukee County has been essential in maintaining the Center and delivering services, but additional State support is crucial to securing the future of both the building and its mission.



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April 21, 2025

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Located on the shores of Lake Michigan, the Center is open seven days a week, offering free access for all to honor Wisconsin's fallen heroes and reflect on their service and sacrifice. With the necessary public/private investments, this site will continue to honor our Veterans for generations to come. That is why we are asking the State of Wisconsin to invest \$9 million in the preservation fund along with private donations to ensure the long-term viability of this iconic landmark and the memorials under its care.

We are grateful for the State's commitment to supporting and honoring Wisconsin's Veterans. We look forward to working with you to ensure this living tribute to their service and sacrifice is preserved for future generations so the War Memorial Center may continue to fulfill its solemn mission to "Honor the Dead – Serve the Living."

Sincerely,

Charles A. Gordon, Chairman of the Board of Trustees
Milwaukee County War Memorial, Inc.



Gary G. Wetzel
Medal of Honor Recipient
Wisconsin



George F. Banda, Commander
American GI Forum Wisconsin



Dennis Burdick, Commander
American Veterans (AMVETS)
Department of Wisconsin



Kim R. Queen, Commander
Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A.
Department of Wisconsin



Jim Johnson, Commander
American Legion
Department of Wisconsin



Gregory Palo, Commander
Disabled American Veterans
Department of Wisconsin



LTC Don W. Korte, Jr. (Ret), USA, President
Military Officers Association of America
Wisconsin Council of Chapters

Honor the Dead – Serve the Living



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Michael A. Beal, National Vice-Chair
National Association for Black Veterans



Ronald Ramos, Commander
Veterans of Foreign Wars
Department of Wisconsin



Glenn Fieber, President
State Board of Directors
Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans



Marty Posekany, President
Allied Veterans Council of Milwaukee County



Don Schamburek, Commander
Catholic War Veterans of the U.S.A.
Wisconsin Department, Post 672



Eric Wolbach, President
Navy League of the U.S., Milwaukee Council



Steven M. Kohnke, Commander
American Legion
Department of Wisconsin 4th District



Marcia Cunningham, LSCS, USN (ret), President
Fleet Reserve Association
Milwaukee Branch 14



Alexander J. Kaleta, Senior Vice Commander
Veterans of Foreign Wars
Wisconsin 4th District



Timothy J. Wendt, Commander
American Veterans (AMVETS)
Department of Wisconsin, 2nd District



CAPT Timothy J. Wendt (Ret), USCG, President
Military Officers Association of America
Southeastern Wisconsin Chapter



Dale Scholl, President
Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans, Chapter 1



Jean Ruka, Chairwoman
Milwaukee County Veterans Association

Honor the Dead - Serve the Living



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May 22, 2025

Re: AB 250

Dear Committee Members,

Board of Trustees:

Charles A. (Andy) Gordon

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Bill Nasgovitz

Jean Ruka

Co Nguyen

President & CEO

My name is Mike Grebe and I'm writing today in support of AB250 and the Preservation Fund for the War Memorial Center. As a current member of the Board of Trustees and Immediate Past Chairman of the War Memorial Center, I can confirm that a Preservation Fund is critically important to the long-term financial health of the Center. The War Memorial Center is the state's most visible and historically significant memorial to all who have served their country. I'm a graduate of West Point and Veteran of the Vietnam War. I've seen firsthand how my fellow Veterans are served and honored with programs, services, ceremonies, and exhibits at the War Memorial Center.

As co-chair of the War Memorial Center's campaign to generate \$9 million in matching support for the Preservation Fund, I can assure you that we will secure these funds. Approximately \$1.6 million has already been committed to date.

Since 2013, when Milwaukee County notified War Memorial Center leadership that county funding would be phased out, numerous changes were put in place to ensure the sustainability of this iconic landmark.

- Private fundraising efforts to address immediate critical facility repairs in 2014 for Veterans Courtyard to assist Milwaukee County.
- The War Memorial established a fundraising activity that generated in excess of \$800,000 from private support in 2024.
- A strategic plan was developed in 2022 addressing new revenue streams, partnerships, and program priorities.
- The successful launch of Operation Advance provided funds for two new statewide permanent exhibits honoring Wisconsin's Medal of Honor recipients and POW/MIA service members.
- WMC partnered with the Southeastern Wisconsin Mental Health Taskforce on Veteran Suicide Prevention to develop and launch public awareness campaigns beginning in 2022 targeting Veterans and their families throughout the state on suicide prevention and mental health resources.

The \$9 million dollars in state funding to establish this Preservation Fund is vital for maintaining this iconic treasure for future generations. Just as our Veterans answered the call when our country needed them most, I hope that state can do the same for our Veterans.

Michael W. Grebe

War Memorial Center Board of Trustee (since 2016)

Immediate Past WMC Chairman

U.S. Army Veteran

Andy Gordon Hearing Statement

State Assembly Public Hearing AB250, May 22, 2025, 11:00am, Room 417 North (GAR Hall)

Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Andy Gordon and I am Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the War Memorial Center in Milwaukee. I am also a proud Veteran of the United States Army, where I served as an infantry officer for nearly seven years, including two deployments to Iraq with the 101st Airborne Division. To me, the War Memorial Center is more than an iconic building—it is a living tribute to the service and sacrifice of those who gave their lives in service to our nation. Our mission at the War Memorial is simple yet profound: “Honor the Dead – Serve the Living.”

Today, I appear before you alongside fellow Veterans, in furtherance of that mission, in support of Assembly Bill 250 to establish a Preservation Fund for the War Memorial Center and the Southeastern Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans Memorial entrusted to our care. These landmarks, set on the shores of Lake Michigan in downtown Milwaukee, serve as beacons of support and reflection for our Veterans and for all Wisconsinites.

If you were to visit the War Memorial Center today, you would witness something extraordinary. As a tribute for Memorial Day, we are hand-placing 27,316 American flags in the field adjoining the War Memorial—a striking visual display of the price of freedom. You see, those 27,316 flags represent every Wisconsinite who was killed in action since our State’s founding in 1848. By tomorrow morning, this solemn display known as the Field of Flags will be complete. Now in its sixth year, this tradition offers families, the community, and Veterans the chance to walk among the flags and experience the weight of freedom. Visitors tell us it is a deeply moving experience. They say, “Thank God we don’t forget them.” That sentiment captures the very essence of the War Memorial Center.

The War Memorial Center was established pursuant to Wisconsin Statute section 45.75, one of only two memorials established by State statute, along with Camp Randall. Milwaukee County War Memorial Corporation is a private nonprofit corporation that operates and maintains the Center. The War Memorial Center is open to the public seven days a week, free of charge.

The idea of a cultural community center dedicated to honoring our servicemembers was conceived in 1944 by three visionary women’s groups. Their leadership forged the path in establishing the War Memorial Center.

The community had big plans for a memorial complex for veterans, art, and music. The idea was that the complex would exist for every citizen, as an instrument of and for democracy, to help carry forward the unfinished work of those who lost their lives by providing for art, drama, music, public discussion, and social assembly, to aid the people of Wisconsin in achieving the full and fruitful community life for which our Veterans sacrificed that we might enjoy, and to strive for a better life through the development of the cultural interests of its people.

In 1947 a massive public campaign began—the largest fund-raising effort in Milwaukee’s 101-year history—and the War Memorial Corporation raised \$2.5 million for the project. The campaign included billboards, messages on movie marquees and trolley cars, and even skywriters. School children held penny drives. It was a remarkable show of support.

The world-renowned architect Eero Saarinen, designer of the St. Louis Gateway Arch, was commissioned to design the building, which is considered one of the finest examples of mid-century modern architecture anywhere in the country. The building was dedicated on Veterans Day in 1957.

Like all big projects, there was debate about location and scope. But the one thing everyone agreed on, was to make this a “living memorial.” They did not want another flagpole with a plaque. Our motto was born from that vision: Honor the Dead — Serve the Living. These words guide us still.

Today, we are the stewards of that legacy and this building for future generations.

We honor the dead through our memorials and exhibits. In the past five years, we have added two permanent exhibits—one honoring Wisconsin’s Medal of Honor recipients, and one honoring Wisconsin’s service members who are Missing in Action or held as Prisoners of War. We also honor the dead by telling their stories to ensure that their sacrifice will never be forgotten. We want to make sure visitors understand that every name they see in the building is not just a name. That name is a person who was a son, daughter, father, mother, sister, or brother.

We serve the living through our programs, exhibits, ceremonies, and events, which touch more than 200,000 lives each year. Among other programs, we play a leading role in the Southeastern Wisconsin Veterans Suicide Prevention Task Force, working to promote awareness and connect Veterans with mental health and suicide prevention resources.

Our education programs reach more than 13,000 students annually. Through our Service Experience Days, we provide opportunities for Veterans to share their stories with students to foster an understanding of service above self and appreciation of the sacrifices made on their behalf. We also provide online lesson plans that are available to educators across the State to download. Our Education Director partners with teachers to help deliver lesson plans and visits schools with our traveling exhibits to provide direct engagement.

Yet, as we continue expanding our services and programs, our building continues to age. The War Memorial is 68-years old, and annual maintenance costs are significant. Currently, our operating budget is funded by a combination of 40% earned revenue, 40% private donations, and 20% from Milwaukee County. Under a 2013 agreement, Milwaukee County’s annual contribution will sunset in 2033.

We have been planning for the reduction in County funding, and, as part of our strategic efforts, we are building a Preservation Fund to safeguard the future of the War Memorial Center and the Vietnam Memorial under our care. We are harnessing that same community sentiment that drove the original 1947 campaign to raise \$9 million from private contributors today. We are asking the State for a *one-time* investment of \$9 million to match the private sector donations. This \$18 million in total funding will generate annual interest to sustain our programs and services and ensure our doors remain open to the public free of charge.

A portion of the Preservation Fund will support the restoration and long-term maintenance of the Southeastern Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans Memorial, erected in 1991 to honor the 57,000 Wisconsinites who served in Vietnam.

This investment is not just about preserving a landmark; it is about ensuring continued service to Wisconsin's Veterans and to the greater community.

By supporting the War Memorial Center, the State of Wisconsin will:

- Ensure the sustainability of an historic, Veteran-serving institution.
- Honor and preserve the stories and sacrifices of Wisconsin's Veterans.
- Inspire future generations through accessible, engaging education and exhibits.
- Protect a vital cultural landmark that belongs to all Wisconsinites.

We are grateful for Milwaukee County's support over the years, and the County will remain an important partner. With your support, we can ensure that the War Memorial Center continues to *Honor the Dead and Serve the Living* for generations to come.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We hope to have earned your support.