

Rob Henken

President, Wisconsin Policy Forum
Member Since 2008, 2019 Rotarian of the Year



As host of the 2024 Republican National Convention, Milwaukee, in a key battleground state, is sure to fall under harsh scrutiny, but city leaders say they are determined to make the convention serve as the gold standard for decades to come. Rob Henken, President of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, is on their side.

“I have always seen myself as a pragmatic problem-solver as opposed to someone who has worked in and around government to fight ideological battles,” Rob said, who joined the organization in 2008. “The Forum doesn’t advocate. It provides fact-based perspective to produce better decision making.”

The nonpartisan, independent statewide policy research organization has offices in Milwaukee and Madison. One of its key missions is to bring people together to discuss policy issues with mutual respect.

Wisconsinites seem on board with that—in theory. A 2022 UW-Madison survey of 2,800 people found that citizens want compromises, not gridlock. However, that same poll found the divide between Wisconsin Democrats and Republicans is the widest in the nation among swing states.

“The good news is that both parties now appear more eager to tone down the fighting and focus more on problem-solving,” Rob said.

The Forum is doing its part. In December, the organization brought together Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, and Assistant Assembly Minority Leader Kalan Haywood, D-Milwaukee, to discuss fiscal issues. And at its upcoming annual meeting, Secretary of Revenue Peter Barca and former Secretary of Revenue Rick Chandler (under Scott Walker) will discuss tax policy.

Last year the Forum issued reports on workforce, education, debt, innovation, substance abuse, safety, privatization, museums, public workforce, housing ownership, community schools and health. Rob said the 2023 research agenda will address longstanding and complex problems at the state and local level, including state conservation funding, the Milwaukee County transit system and park-funding challenges and childcare affordability.

“The biggest economic problem we face as a state is ensuring we have the workforce we need to sustain and enhance economic growth,” Rob said. “We cannot fail to address that issue, and it is ripe for bi-partisan attention.”



Rob's first job in Milwaukee when he moved to the city in 1994 was with the Alliance for Future Transit, a nonprofit formed by metro Milwaukee business leaders to advocate for a balanced transportation plan for the region.

"As with most issues, the transportation debate in Milwaukee needs thoughtfulness and balance," Rob said. "There is a need for both improved highways and modern mass transit, though the specifics of both must be supported by data and unbiased transportation forecasts."

After moving on from the Alliance, Rob worked as fiscal analyst and research director for the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors and then served in then-Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker's cabinet, first as Health and Human Services director and later as Administration director. In his previous work in government in Washington, D.C., he worked for two Democrats, serving as chief of staff for Rep. Robert Torricelli from New Jersey, and legislative aide for Rep. Chet Atkins from Massachusetts. His varied and bipartisan work experiences allowed him to hone his policy versatility and build cross-party credibility.

Rob's first career, however, might surprise some.

While an undergrad at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, he was a sports broadcast intern at ABC affiliate WLNE-TV and a news and sports director for WBRU, Brown's commercial radio station. His first job was as a reporter at WCCM/WCGY radio in Lawrence, Massachusetts, owned by famed sportscaster Curt Gowdy. Rob chose to change career tracks after deciding that sports was not conducive to his goal of changing the world.

As a native of Newton, Massachusetts, Rob, who ran two Boston marathons, is a diehard Boston sports fan.

"My wife and I had to watch the Bucks–Celtics playoff series last year in different rooms," he said. His wife Barrie is a Milwaukee native whom he met in grad school at American University in Washington, D.C. They both worked on Capitol Hill when they started a family and decided Milwaukee was a better place to raise children. Their son Danny is director of business analytics for the Milwaukee Brewers, and Ben is a senior research analyst for the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. They are proud grandparents of 21-month-old Rozzie.

"It obviously has not been lost on me and is quite a thrill that our two sons are following their dad's passions: baseball and policy."

Rob, Rotarian of the Year in 2019, serves on the Program Committee.

"Rotary is a great place for people who care about our community" he said. "It's a place overflowing with servant leadership."



Editor's Note: *Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Jeff Smoller.*