

Winter Ice Safety Budget Priority

Introduced by Dea Larsen Converse

Based on the [Wisconsin Watch article](#) highlighting the increasing danger of unstable ice due to climate change, and the known fiscal constraints of the 2026 Dane County budget, I propose a new budget priority proposal for the Dane County Lakes and Watersheds Commission.

Launch a Winter Lake Safety & Climate Adaptation Initiative

Rationale: Climate change has fundamentally altered the winter freeze cycles of Dane County's lakes, creating a public safety crisis that current management strategies do not fully address. As reported by [Wisconsin Watch](#) (Jan 2026), Madison Fire Department lake rescues have spiked significantly—from one in 2023 to ten in the subsequent two winters—driven by rapid freeze-thaw cycles that create structurally compromised "mixed ice." This priority is also needed to protect the winter tourism tax base, which funds broader county services. I am proposing a focus on how increased flow in the Yahara River is compromising ice safety at the confluence of the river and Lake Monona.

Proposed Actions:

1. **Submit a resolution to the Dane County Board (see attached)**
2. **Modernize Public Education:** Direct the Lakes and Watersheds staff to collaborate with the Dane County Sheriff's Office Marine and Trail Enforcement bureau to update winter safety materials. Messaging should shift from static "ice thickness" guidelines to "condition-based" awareness, highlighting the specific dangers of rapid temperature fluctuations and compromised ice structure.
3. **Research Collaboration:** Encourage a formal knowledge-sharing partnership with the UW-Madison Center for Limnology to better understand "winter limnology" and the specific dynamics of ice formation in a warming climate, ensuring that county policy is informed by the latest science.
4. **Economic Resilience Planning:** Incorporate climate volatility assessments into future watershed planning to better support the resilience of the winter recreation economy.

Alignment with Existing Goals: This priority aligns with the "**Protect and Improve Public Safety**" core mandate of the County Executive's budget.

Proposed speakers to refine this priority:

1. Jon Mast

Lieutenant on the Madison Fire Department (MFD) Lake Rescue Team

- **Email:** fire@cityofmadison.com (General Administration)

- **As a resource about** ice rescue operations, he can inform the Commission on how we currently educate the public about ice safety, including how "pressure heaves" and the invisible gaps created when ice expands and contracts during Madison's increasingly frequent temperature swings can impact ice safety.

2. Adrianna Gorsky

Ph.D. Candidate, Center for Limnology, University of Wisconsin–Madison

- **Email:** agorsky@wisc.edu
- **Professional Profiles:**
 - [Dugan Lab - Staff Profile](#)
 - [UW-Madison Graduate Student Spotlight](#)
 - [ResearchGate Publications](#)
- As her research focuses on "winter limnology"—the study of lakes during the ice-on period—she can provide information on how climate change is creating "mixed ice" (layers of black and white ice) that lacks the structural integrity of traditional solid ice.

3. John Reimer

- As the county's lead expert on lake freeze-thaw cycles and infrastructure resilience, John Reimer can provide critical insight into how climate-driven weather impacts our waterways. Specifically, his analysis is needed to determine how increased flow in the Yahara River is compromising ice safety at the confluence of the river and Lake Monona.

Resources

- **Primary Article:** [On thin ice: Falls through the ice on Wisconsin lakes are becoming more common](#) (*Wisconsin Watch*, January 8, 2026).
- **DNR Ice Safety Guidelines:** [Wisconsin DNR Ice Safety Hub](#)
- **Madison Lake Rescue Team:** [MFD Special Teams - Lake Rescue](#)

Proposed Resolution

DANE COUNTY LAKES AND WATERSHEDS COMMISSION

Resolution No. [2026-XX]

SUBJECT: ESTABLISHING A STRATEGIC PRIORITY FOR WINTER LAKE SAFETY AND CLIMATE ADAPTATION AWARENESS

WHEREAS, Dane County's lakes are central to our region's identity, economy, and quality of life, supporting a winter tourism and recreation economy that relies on safe and predictable ice conditions; and

WHEREAS, climate change has fundamentally altered local winter weather patterns, resulting in the 2010s being the most extreme weather decade in Wisconsin history and driving a trend of warmer winters, shorter freeze durations, and rapid freeze-thaw cycles; and

WHEREAS, recent data highlights a concerning rise in winter safety incidents, with the Madison Fire Department's Lake Rescue Team reporting a significant increase in calls—from a single rescue in 2023 to ten rescues across the subsequent two winters—driven by unpredictable ice stability; and

WHEREAS, University of Wisconsin researchers and the Department of Natural Resources indicate that traditional visual indicators of ice safety (such as thickness alone) are becoming less reliable due to the formation of "mixed ice" (layers of snow and ice) and "rot" caused by mid-winter warm spells; and

WHEREAS, the economic viability of winter events, such as the Clean Lakes Alliance "Frozen Assets" festival and local ice fishing businesses, is increasingly threatened by these volatile conditions; and

WHEREAS, the Dane County Lakes and Watersheds Commission is charged with protecting the water quality and public use of county waters;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Dane County Lakes and Watersheds Commission formally adopts "Winter Lake Safety & Climate Adaptation" as a strategic priority area for the 2026-2027 term.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Commission recommends the following actions be integrated into county watershed management and public information efforts:

5. **Modernized Public Education:** Direct the Lakes and Watersheds staff to collaborate with the Dane County Sheriff's Office Marine and Trail Enforcement bureau to update winter safety materials. Messaging should shift from static "ice thickness" guidelines to

- "condition-based" awareness, highlighting the specific dangers of rapid temperature fluctuations and compromised ice structure.
6. **Research Collaboration:** Encourage a formal knowledge-sharing partnership with the UW-Madison Center for Limnology to better understand "winter limnology" and the specific dynamics of ice formation in a warming climate, ensuring that county policy is informed by the latest science.
 7. **Economic Resilience Planning:** Incorporate climate volatility assessments into future watershed planning to better support the resilience of the winter recreation economy.

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that a copy of this resolution be transmitted to the Dane County Board of Supervisors, the Dane County Sheriff, and the Dane County Executive to inform future budget and policy considerations regarding public safety and natural resource management.