

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
INTEROFFICE COMMUNICATION

DATE: February 13, 2026

TO: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Celia Benton, Economic Development and Real Estate Services Director, Department of Administrative Services, Sean Hayes, Director of Facilities Management
Vanessa Koster, Director of Administration, Parks Departments
Jacqueline Formanek, Director for Disability Services, Department of Health and Human Services

SUBJECT: Informational Report on ongoing lease discussions with Easterseals Southeast Wisconsin for Wil-O-Way Grant and Underwood Facilities

POLICY

The Wil-O-Way properties are on land zoned as parks; therefore, Wisconsin Statute § 59.17(2)(b)3 applies, which provides that the County Board may continue to exercise authority over land zoned as a park. In the law of property, authority over land includes authority over all rights appurtenant to the land.

Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances § 56.10 requires County Board approval for Parks leases exceeding one year.

BACKGROUND

As reported in [File 25-746](#), Milwaukee County is at a critical juncture as we work to reconcile an unsustainable fiscal trajectory with the community's strong desire to preserve valued opportunities for connection, health, learning, and inclusion for older adults and persons with disabilities. Addressing this challenge requires interdepartmental collaboration and creative partnerships beyond County government.

To that end, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Parks Department, and the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) have begun negotiations with Easterseals of Southeast Wisconsin regarding a potential long-term lease for the management of the two Wil-O-Way facilities, South Milwaukee and Wauwatosa, where they are already providing programming.

Wil-O-Way Recreation Centers

Milwaukee County's Wil-O-Way Grant and Wil-O-Way Underwood buildings are located within Milwaukee County parkland and are owned and managed by the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) – Facilities Management Division. Programming at these locations is offered through the Department of Health and Human Services.

Wil-O-Way Grant and Wil-O-Way Underwood are longstanding Milwaukee County Parks facilities designed to provide inclusive recreation and respite programming for individuals with disabilities across the County. These facilities serve children, adults, seniors, families, and caregivers through structured programs, community events, and seasonal activities.

- Wil-O-Way Grant Recreation Center is located within Grant Park in the City of South Milwaukee and includes approximately 11,400 square feet of indoor space along with associated outdoor amenities.
- Wil-O-Way Underwood Recreation Center is located within Underwood Park in the City of Wauwatosa and includes approximately 10,350 square feet of indoor space with supporting outdoor areas.

As detailed in report 25-746, both Wil-O-Way facilities have historically required significant County investment to maintain operations, utilities, and capital needs while demand for disability-focused programming continues to grow.

Please see below regarding capital and operational spends and needs for both properties:

Facility	Avg Capital			
	Capital Investments 2014-2025	Investment / Year	Avg Operating Spend / Year	5-Year Capital Needs*
Wil-O-Way Grant	\$355,195	\$32,290	\$43,934	\$1,552,500
Wil-O-Way Underwood	\$386,793	\$35,163	\$68,748	\$2,931,500
TOTALS	\$741,988	\$67,453	\$112,682	\$4,484,000
*Excluding splash pads and playgrounds				

Absent a successful agreement, the anticipated capital needs for the Wil-O-Way facilities (excluding splash pads and playgrounds) are estimated at \$4.84 million over the next five years, with average annual operating costs of approximately \$112,682. The intent of exploring a partnership with Easterseals is to significantly reduce County capital and operating expenses while enabling the expansion of high-quality programming that meets community need.

Easterseals Southeast Wisconsin

Easterseals Southeast Wisconsin is a nationally affiliated nonprofit organization with a long-standing presence in Milwaukee County. Easterseals provides comprehensive services for individuals with disabilities, including inclusive recreation, respite care, life skills development, and family support services.

Easterseals has partnered with Milwaukee County’s Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD) for more than a decade and is widely recognized by families, caregivers, and stakeholders as a trusted and mission-aligned service provider. The organization possesses the staffing, operational infrastructure, and financial capacity necessary to manage complex facilities and deliver year-round programming.

Milwaukee County partners with Easterseals Southeast Wisconsin to deliver inclusive recreation, respite, and skill-building programs at Wil-O-Way facilities, serving individuals with disabilities across the lifespan. The Easter Seals contract budget for 2026 is \$280,284, which is the same amount as for 2025.

Overview of the Partnership

Milwaukee County's Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD) collaborates closely with Easterseals Southeast Wisconsin to provide year-round programming at the Wil-O-Way Recreation Centers located in South Milwaukee (Grant Park) and Wauwatosa (Underwood Creek). This partnership reflects a shared commitment to accessibility, inclusion, and community engagement for individuals with disabilities.

Programming, Camps & Events at Wil-O-Way

Together, OPD and Easterseals host a variety of recreational and enrichment activities designed to foster independence, socialization, and fun:

- Seasonal Recreation Programs offered in spring, summer, and fall
- Includes bowling, ceramics, cooking classes, community outings, and Friday night dances

Summer Camps & Respite Services

- Respite Camp offer immersive experiences for youth, teens, and adults
- Activities include outdoor adventures, goal-setting, and inclusive group sessions

Special Events

- Holiday-themed dances, talent shows, and family-friendly gatherings
- Events often include adaptive equipment, accessible transportation, and support staff

Tap the Potential Program

- Focuses on skill-building and community integration for adults with disabilities
- Includes volunteer opportunities, social outings, and personal development workshops

Populations Served by Easterseals

Easterseals Southeast Wisconsin serves a diverse range of individuals with disabilities, including:

Youth & Teens (Ages 3–18)

- Through camps and after-school programs focused on social skills and recreation

Transitioning Young Adults (Ages 15–25)

- Via Transitions Camp, which supports life skills, independence, and vocational readiness

Adults (Ages 18+)

- Through Adult Recreation Programs, employment services, and community engagement

Older Adults (Ages 40+)

- Specialized sessions designed to promote wellness, connection, and continued activity
- Easterseals also supports individuals with mental health challenges, AODA concerns, and those seeking workforce development opportunities.

Impact of the Collaboration

This partnership allows Milwaukee County to:

- Expand inclusive recreation across age groups
- Provide respite for caregivers
- Support transition planning for youth and young adults
- Offer community-based programming that reflects the needs and interests of participants

Together, OPD and Easterseals create a welcoming space at Wil-O-Way where all abilities are celebrated, and barriers are removed.

NEXT STEPS

If negotiations are successful, DHHS, Parks, and DAS will report back to the Board on the proposed lease terms and request authorization to enter into a long-term agreement for the Wil-O-Way facilities. Our shared goal is to substantially reduce County capital and operating obligations while ensuring the continuation of meaningful, inclusive programming for the community.

ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

3A: Invest “upstream” to address root causes of health disparities.

3B: Enhance the County’s fiscal health and sustainability.

A potential lease with Easterseals for the Wil-O-Way facilities supports Milwaukee County’s strategic priorities by:

- Expanding inclusive services for residents with disabilities
- Strengthening partnerships with trusted nonprofit providers
- Ensuring responsible stewardship of County-owned facilities
- Promoting fiscal sustainability and operational efficiency

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

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