

SUNDAY PLUS



'Don't be afraid'
A Colectivo baker reflects on the three-year struggle for a union. 3F

Scope of sales tax law

What's included in and excluded from the proposed Milwaukee sales tax? 2F

Fork. Spoon. Life.

Isa's Ice Cream serves nieve de garrafa in flavors from corn to mango. 5F

Midsummer showcase

How have Milwaukee Brewers players fared in past MLB all-star games? 6F

DIFFERENCE-MAKERS

BORN IN PRISON, HOMELESS IN COLLEGE, Bria Burris now serves on MATC board



Bria Burris stands outside the Milwaukee Area Technical College downtown campus. A 2020 MATC graduate, she's now an MATC District Board member and saving up to study for a bachelor's degree. MIKE DE SISTI / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

One phone call changed the former felon's trajectory in life

Kelly Meyerhofer Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Out of savings and a few months into classes at Milwaukee Area Technical College, Bria Burris lost her home in 2018. ● Burris and her two kids couch-surfed for a while, crashing with friends and family. Then they moved to Morris, Ill., where her partner at the time lived, bringing some stability to their living situation but adding a long commute back to Milwaukee every weekday. She left the house by 4:30 a.m. to drop her kids off at their Milwaukee school, then curled up in her car to sleep in MATC's faculty parking lot before her own classes began. She paid for her tuition out of pocket; a felony conviction made her ineligible for a Pell grant. ● "Everything was working against me," she said.

Stories like Burris' are common at MATC. Many students seek to lift themselves out of generational poverty but find their dreams derailed by obstacles — a missed rent payment, a broken-down car, a couple hundred dollars of debt owed to the college. Burris' story stands out in one key way: The 2020 graduate now serves on the MATC District Board. Most other board members have bachelor's and graduate degrees. One's a lawyer, another is a state lawmaker and a third runs a suburban school district. Burris was the only board member this past school year with the lived experience of earning an MATC degree. Formerly homeless, she now works for

the City of Milwaukee, helping families secure rental assistance.

"Things have just come really full circle for me," Burris said. "I think I'm in the right place and I think I'm doing the right thing and hoping (that) sharing my story does influence someone else to believe in themselves."

She grew up as a foster kid, teen mom

Burris, 33, was born in Taycheedah women's prison on June 19 — June-teenth. Her great-grandmother, Alline Atkins, became her caregiver when she was three days old.

An elementary school teacher told

"Everything about my life said that I would fail. And I did. Many times. But I continued to get back up and fight."

Bria Burris

Burris about the historical importance of her birthday, which commemorates the end of slavery in the U.S. Burris liked how her birthday equated to freedom.

"I think because of that I always was a bit of a rebel," she said.

Around age 6, Burris said, she was "snatched out of school and taken to some strange building and basically told I'm never going home again." She's still, to this day, unsure why she was placed into the foster care system.

Burris reunited with her mom at age 13 but was kicked out of the house a couple of years later.

She dropped out of high school after sophomore year.

A visit to Planned Parenthood confirmed Burris was pregnant at 17. She remembers a lonely bus ride after the appointment, the city's scenery blurring by as she processed her options.

The dad was out of the picture and

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AN EXPLAINER

Exploring scope of Milwaukee's new sales tax law

Measure applies only to existing taxable items

Drew Dawson

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

The City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County are now empowered to put new or increased sales taxes in place.

Last month Gov. Tony Evers signed a local government funding bill that allows city and county elected leaders to each implement sales taxes that would help avoid serious funding shortfalls in the coming years.

The new law allows the city to levy a 2% sales tax while Milwaukee County could levy a 0.4% sales tax on top of its existing 0.5% tax – but each tax must be approved by two-thirds votes of the city's Common Council or the County Board of Supervisors, respectively. Mayor Cavalier Johnson and County Executive David Crowley, key negotiators on the new state law, are expected to sign the local sales tax legislation.

Here is what you should know about these potential new taxes:

How did the sales tax changes come about?

As cities and other municipalities struggle financially despite a growing state surplus, Evers and Republican state legislative leaders reached a local government funding deal on June 8 after months of negotiations. Part of that deal included the ability to levy new sales taxes in the city and county.

The City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County have sought local sales taxes to address fiscal challenges that are threatening to force deep cuts in services in the coming years.

What does the sales tax apply to?

According to the state Department of Revenue, the local sales taxes would be made up of the same general base as the state sales tax. This means that nothing would be added to or subtracted from items that the existing state sales tax already applies to.

Generally, items (tangible personal property) are subject to tax unless specifically exempt, and services are not subject to tax unless they are specifically deemed taxable. Tangible personal property is defined by the state Department of Revenue as, "personal property that can be seen, weighed, measured, felt, or touched, or that is in any other manner perceptible to the senses."

Taxable goods include but are not limited to:

- Clothing
- Computers
- Office equipment
- Electricity (with exceptions)
- Gas (with exceptions)
- Steam
- Water (with exceptions)
- Cigarettes
- Cable television, including installation
- Interstate telephone and telegraph services
- Magazines other than those sold by subscription
- Telephone company central office equipment and coin-operated telephone services



People enter Summerfest June 22 at Henry Maier Festival Park in Milwaukee. The proposed Milwaukee sales tax would apply to entertainment events or places.
JOVANNY HERNANDEZ / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

- Telephone answering and messaging services and telecommunications services terminating in and billed to a service address in the state

Digital goods

Taxable services include:

- Rooms or lodging for less than one month by hotelkeepers, motel operators and other persons furnishing accommodations to the public.

- Admissions to amusement, athletic, entertainment or recreational events or places. Admissions to places or events that are educational in nature, such as museums or zoos, and admissions to county fairs are exempt from sales tax.

- Laundry, dry cleaning, pressing, and dyeing services (with exemptions)

- Prepaid calling, telecommunications, and ancillary services, if the service takes place in Wisconsin.

- Photographic services, including the processing, printing, and enlarging of film, and the services of photographers for the taking, reproducing, and sale of photographs.

- Parking or providing parking space for motor vehicles and aircraft; docking or providing storage space for boats.

- The repair, inspection, and maintenance of tangible personal property, and the installation of tangible personal property, except when such installation constitutes a capital improvement to real property.

- The production, printing, or imprinting of tangible personal property for consumers who furnish directly or indirectly the materials used in such processes.

- Landscaping and lawn maintenance services.

- Towing and hauling of motor vehicles.

What does the sales tax exclude?

The exemptions for the proposed sales tax change would be no different than those exempt from the current sales taxes.

Items include:

- Food and food ingredients except candy, soft drinks, dietary supple-

ments, and prepared food. Food for direct consumption on the premises, such as meals sold in restaurants, cafes, and cafeterias, is taxable.

- Bottled water, water sold through public water mains.

- Meals furnished by institutions of higher education.

- Fuel and electricity for residential use, biomass used for residential fuel; deer and other cervids sold to hunting preserves.

- Motor fuels; vegetable oil and animal fats converted to exempt vehicle fuels.

- Fuel and electricity used in manufacturing.

- Fuels converted to electric energy, gas or steam by utilities.

- Waste treatment facilities and machinery and equipment used in recycling.

- Mobile and manufactured homes.
- Newspapers, subscription periodicals and shoppers guides; catalogs and catalog envelopes.

- Caskets and burial vaults.
- U.S. and State of Wisconsin flags.

- Self-service laundry and dry cleaning services.

- Prescription drugs (excluding insulin), insulin for the treatment of diabetes and supplies for blood sugar testing.

- Commercial vessels and barges.

- Containers, labels, sacks, cans, boxes, and other packaging and shipping materials.

- Restaurant employee meals.

- Servers and computers used in commercial printing.

- Amusement devices-video and electronic games.

- Tournament or league entrance fees.

How much would the new sales tax(es) be in Milwaukee?

There are two separate sales tax changes allowed per the local government funding deal. One is specifically for the City of Milwaukee that allows the city to levy 2% sales tax. This would be the first sales tax levied by the city

alone.

The other local sales tax change is the allowance of Milwaukee County to levy an additional 0.4% sales tax on top of the existing 0.5% sales tax in the county.

Both sales taxes would be on top of the state's 5% sales tax. If both new sales taxes were implemented, the sales tax in the city of Milwaukee would be 7.9% and 5.9% in the rest of the county.

How would it be implemented?

According to the local government funding deal, the Milwaukee Common Council will need a two-thirds vote for the city to levy a 2% sales tax.

The Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors would also need a two-thirds vote to levy a 0.4% sales tax on top of its existing 0.5% sales tax, per the agreement.

Is a city sales tax common?

Yes. According to a study from the Wisconsin Policy Forum, many cities have their own sales taxes. Cities that have them are Chicago (10.25% with state sales tax), Kansas City, Kan. (9.125% with state sales tax), Kansas City, Mo. (8.85% with state sales tax), Minneapolis (8.025% with state sales tax) and Cleveland (8% with state sales tax).

How much money would the sales taxes generate if implemented?

If the sales taxes were implemented with a Jan. 1, 2024, start date, the Department of Revenue estimated that the city sales tax (2%) would generate \$193.6 million in revenue and the additional county sales tax (0.4%) would generate \$77.4 million in revenue on top of the 0.5% tax already in place in the first year.

The county received \$96.3 million in sales tax revenue in 2022, \$90.1 million in 2021 and \$79.9 million in 2020, according to state Department of Revenue data on county sales tax distributions.

Alison Dirr contributed to this report.

Burris

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she knew she wasn't ready to raise a child on her own.

Atkins helped raise Burris' daughter, Najaha. Burris had a second daughter, Dezira, at 19.

That same year, Burris pleaded guilty to a felony charge of marijuana possession. She thought at the time her plea agreement allowed for the charge to be expunged after she paid restitution and completed two years of probation. But a judge denied her request, and the criminal record would haunt her for the next eight years.

Burris trades construction job for college

Most employers rejected her applications, unwilling to hire a felon. She also couldn't qualify for public housing.

Burris landed some odd jobs, partici-

pating in clinical research studies and working construction. It was back-breaking work that she found little joy in doing. She made just enough to pay the bills.

When Atkins died in 2017, Burris slid into depression. She had lost the one constant in her life. Ultimately, however, the loss propelled her to make a change. She needed purpose. So she took the plunge, quitting her carpentry gig and enrolling full-time at MATC, even though she had to pay full tuition.

Burris studied human services, a program that trains students to work with vulnerable populations, such as youth, the elderly and those struggling with substance abuse.

"I felt like I would be good at doing that because I had had a lifetime of surviving things and taking care of people," she said.

The program requirements included volunteer hours and an internship. She worried her felony conviction would again hold her back.

Enter Michael Rosen, a longtime

MATC professor who had recently retired and started the FAST Fund, a nonprofit emergency aid fund that helps students in a financial pinch. He heard her story and offered to call a friend of his, a former judge, to see what could be done on a pro bono basis.

The judge got the felony expunged from Burris' record.

The call didn't cost Rosen or the FAST Fund a dime, but it changed Burris' life. She gained access to a Pell grant and landed an internship with the FAST Fund, putting her degree within reach.

"The lesson for me is there's so much talent in our community that is wasted because of a lack of opportunity or draconian rules," Rosen said.

More education, maybe a political career

In July 2020, Burris became the first in her family of 11 to graduate from college. The diploma for her associate's degree is propped up on a bookshelf in the front room of her house in Milwaukee's

northwest Amani neighborhood.

Burris would like to make room for another diploma, a bachelor's degree. She's saving money to someday enroll at Marquette University. Urban studies sounds interesting.

Burris' day job is deeply gratifying, helping people who are in the position that she was in just a few years ago. She started as an intake worker for the Wisconsin Rental Assistance Program, which provided relief to renters facing eviction during the pandemic. She's been promoted several times and now reviews tenant applications for the city Housing Authority.

Burris was appointed last summer to the MATC District Board for a three-year term ending in 2025. She'd like to eventually go into politics, maybe become an alderwoman. She's seen throughout her life how systems hinder families instead of help.

"Everything about my life said that I would fail," Burris said. "And I did. Many times. But I continued to get back up and fight."