



Tommy Thompson's Legacy of Economic Prosperity: Six Ways He Made It Happen

By Thomas W. Still

A story that captures Gov. Tommy Thompson's approach to economic development is one that ended in failure ... or, at least, that's how it seemed at the time.

It was 1993 and Motorola, the telecommunications giant based in Schaumburg, Ill., announced it wanted to build a new corporate campus. Thompson got word and sprang into action, believing he could cajole the company into moving across the border into Wisconsin.

The governor, then-Revenue Secretary Mark Bugher and then-Commerce Secretary Robert Trunzo promptly trekked to Schaumburg to meet with Motorola's leadership team. The plan was to create an economic development zone in Beloit to generate millions of dollars in tax breaks. It was money Thompson hoped to recoup over time through construction of a high-tech plant and corporate headquarters with 3,000 or more workers.

On the day Motorola's scout team arrived in Beloit to tour the site, Thompson had arranged for them to gather in a trailer that was packed with Green Bay Packers gear, Wisconsin Badgers accessories and other "cheese state" bling. A phone strategically left in the trailer rang just as the Motorola team stepped inside.

It was Thompson, welcoming them to Beloit and urging them to make Wisconsin the company's new home.

"He was trying to make the sales pitch different, to have it really stand out," recalled Bugher, who later served as Thompson's Administration Secretary. "That was Tommy. There was always a bit of showmanship involved because he loved doing deals, and he loved winning deals even more."

Thompson didn't win the Motorola deal, however. The state of Illinois offered Motorola a richer package and the company announced it would build a \$100-million, 1.5 million square-foot campus in Harvard, Ill., the home town of the company's top executive at the time.

Harvard's windfall was short-lived. After opening in 1996, the plant only operated until March 2003, when the company decided to cut costs and take much of its production offshore. The next 14 years failed to fill the hole left by Motorola's departure; a smartphone manufacturer announced in March 2017 it will soon begin production there.

"So I guess we dodged a bullet on that one," Bugher said with a chuckle.



The Motorola deal epitomizes the multiple sides of Tommy Thompson – facets which made him the symbol of a Wisconsin economic comeback that endures to this day.

- He was a tireless cheerleader for the state and its attributes.
- He was an intellectually curious “techie,” enamored by the idea of Wisconsin growing and attracting New Economy businesses.
- He was a builder who knew that infrastructure, such as roads, buildings, power and communications systems, were essential to a modern economy.
- He was a leader who mobilized those around him and grew to become an effective manager.
- He was a deal-maker who relished the art of negotiation, whether it involved other public officials, political rivals or corporate scions.
- He was undeniably lucky, sometimes even when it appeared he had failed.

Thirty years after Thompson took office as Wisconsin’s 42nd and ultimately longest-serving governor, the traits that made him right for the state’s economic times are worth examining – not only because they speak to his legacy, but because they may offer guidance to those who will follow in Wisconsin and elsewhere.

First, however, it’s instructive to understand the forces that propelled veteran legislator Thompson from his “Dr. No” image in the Wisconsin Assembly to the optimistic “Governor Yes” on the state economy.

More than any other issue, the promise of restoring economic prosperity led to Thompson’s election victory in 1986 over incumbent Gov. Anthony Earl, a Democrat who was elected in 1982 during a national recession that hit Wisconsin harder than most states.

The recession of 1979 to 1983 cost Wisconsin more than 75,000 jobs and followed a period in which the state’s economy was already sluggish. About 50,000 manufacturing jobs were lost, many in Milwaukee, the core of Wisconsin’s industrial might.

Companies such as Allis Chalmers and A.O. Smith closed Milwaukee plants in the early 1980s; foreign competitors to the state’s manufacturing prominence were on the march; automation was changing the face of manufacturing and the need for semi-skilled workers; and the state’s fiscal condition had deteriorated for a mix of reasons, not the least of which was the tax climate.

Unemployment stood at more than 10 percent in 1982 and 1983 and had dropped only to 7 percent by 1986, which meant a slice of Wisconsin’s workforce had never recovered from



the recession – despite the start of a U.S. economic rebound. Wisconsin began to experience a “brain drain” as young and working-age people left the state in search of opportunity.

The catalyzing event was the 1985 decision by Kimberly Clark Corp. and its president, Darwin Smith, to move its corporate headquarters to Irving, Texas, just outside Dallas. For a company that had symbolized Wisconsin’s paper industry for more than 100 years, it was a move that sounded a publicly audible alarm – even if the actual numbers of jobs lost was relatively small.

A year before the Kimberly Clark move, the Wisconsin Strategic Development Commission had been created by Earl to devise the state’s first long-term plan for economic and job growth. Assembly Minority Leader Thompson was a member of the commission, a role that elevated him in the eyes of business executives and deepened his knowledge of what makes an economy tick.

The commission’s work included a Wisconsin Business Climate Study that prompted more than 100 recommendations, including a simple goal Thompson never forgot: “Economic development must be raised to the number one priority (and) the governor must lead both the public and private sectors in this mission.”

Thompson campaigned on restoring the Wisconsin economy and defeated Earl with 53 percent of the vote, a showing that rowed against the tide of national mid-term elections in which Democrats retook the U.S. Senate and added to their margin in the House of Representatives.

The stage was set for a new approach.

“Even before taking office, the governor-elect was on the phone with General Motors and Chrysler Corporation lobbying each business to retain manufacturing jobs in the state,” wrote David J. Ward and Bruce Siebold in their paper, “The Wisconsin Economy 1987-2000: Turnaround and growth under Governor Tommy G. Thompson.”

“He was successful in both instances. GM agreed to modernize and extend the life of the Janesville production plant. Chrysler shut down auto production but retained hundreds of jobs making auto engines,” Ward and Siebold wrote.

Moving quickly became a Thompson hallmark, not only in reaching beyond Wisconsin’s borders to pursue business opportunities, but working within them to create conditions for success.

After taking office in January 1987, Thompson appointed the first members of the Wisconsin Strategic Development Council to continue the work of the strategic development commission. Wisconsin enacted its first direct financial incentives through the creation of the Wisconsin Technology Development Fund.



Through it money was set aside for labor training and research and development, with an emphasis on tapping into new manufacturing technologies and attracting emerging businesses. The role of the Wisconsin Department of Commerce was strengthened through a succession of secretaries who shared his commitment to growth, and no state agency was excused from taking part in the effort.

Working with a Legislature controlled by Democrats, Thompson began the process of reforming both the reality and the perception of Wisconsin's tax system.

His first biennial budget bill in 1987 reduced personal income tax rates, with the top rate falling below 7 percent for the first time since the 1930s. Wisconsin retained its 60 percent capital-gains exclusion to encourage investment at a time when the exclusion was eliminated at the federal level and in many other states. Wisconsin also adopted a five-year phase-out of the state inheritance tax, a move calculated to keep more "snowbirds" from taking their wealth outside Wisconsin borders.

"One of the key economic development accomplishments of the Thompson administration was to make our tax system more competitive," said Rick Chandler, state Revenue secretary for part of that time and now serving in the same role for Gov. Scott Walker. "When Governor Thompson took office, Wisconsin was sometimes referred to in the national media as a 'tax hell' because of our heavy state and local tax burden relative to other states."

Personal income tax rates were cut twice more during Thompson's tenure, the standard deduction was increased, personal exemptions were created and tax brackets were indexed to inflation. Property taxes were cut by \$1.2 billion in 1995, largely through a state program to pick up two-thirds of local school budgets. That program ended in 2003 due to its overall cost.

Thompson's tax reforms were more evolutionary than revolutionary, Chandler said, as they required persistence in the face of opposition in some quarters.

"The initiatives in the tax area have produced significant results over time, but it required an ongoing commitment," he said.

What were those results? Economic data gathered by Ward and Siebold helps to tell the story.

- Wisconsin added about 100,000 manufacturing jobs during Thompson's tenure, re-establishing the state's status as an industry leader. Wisconsin's job growth rate from 1987 through 2000, the last full year in which Thompson served as governor, was 35.3 percent. That exceeded the U.S. average of 31 percent as well as rates in Illinois (22 percent), Indiana (31.4 percent) and Michigan (27 percent).



- In the years before Thompson took office, Wisconsin's unemployment rate generally exceeded the U.S. average. Beginning in 1987 and continuing throughout his tenure, Wisconsin's jobless rate was below the national average – falling to 3.4 percent in early 2000. That's a rate not matched by the state until March 2017.
- Per capita personal income in Wisconsin grew faster than the U.S. average from 1987 through 2000, even during a period when the state's population didn't grow as fast as the national average. Per capita personal income rose by 27.2 percent in Wisconsin compared with 24.1 percent for the nation.
- Wisconsin's economic output during the Thompson years also exceeded the U.S. average, as measured by gross state product. Output of Wisconsin goods and services grew by 72.6 percent from 1987 to 2000, compared with 66.7 percent for the United States, 64.8 percent for Illinois, 71.6 percent for Indiana and 52.4 percent for Michigan.

Wisconsin is often compared to its neighbors in Minnesota when it comes to economic performance. However, job creation figures during the Thompson years were strikingly similar, based on figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Wisconsin grew from just under 2.30 million jobs in January 1987 to more than 2.88 million in December 2000, an increase of roughly 585,000 jobs.

Fueled by the medical device industry and other tech-based sectors, Minnesota added about 600,000 jobs during the same period, growing from 2.14 million jobs in 1987 to 2.74 million in 2000.

Wisconsin's return to economic prosperity wasn't permanent, of course, as manufacturing employment began to decline by early 2000 and continued to shrink throughout the next decade and beyond as a combination of factors took hold – not the least of which was the "Great Recession" that shook the state beginning in 2008. It was a crisis inherited by Walker when he took office in 2011.

Today, job creation in Wisconsin continues to lag the U.S. average but unemployment is running well below the U.S. rate and Wisconsin's labor force participation ranks among the nation's 10 best. The foundation of tax competitiveness laid by Thompson also remains intact, as Wisconsin's state and local tax burden rank was fallen from 3rd among the 50 states in 1994 to 16th highest in 2014, the latest year for which federal data is available.

The story of Thompson's economic legacy isn't told by numbers alone, however. It's colored by tangible and intangible elements of style, personality and strategic decision-making that may be remembered long after facts and figures are forgotten.

Tommy the Cheerleader

"It's a great day to be from Wisconsin."



With that signature line, Thompson opened many of his speeches, often dwelling on the attributes of the Badger state, bragging about the latest economic metric and virtually compelling those around him to bask in his enthusiasm.

When combined with his memory for names and faces (“So, how is your Uncle Harry? Is he still working for the XYZ Company?”), Thompson’s down-home charm got him through doors from Main Street to Wall Street.

“Tommy’s most enduring economic development accomplishment, in my opinion, was not any specific initiative, but a series of policies aimed at revitalizing the Wisconsin economy. He reset the ‘tone’, if you will,” said Jim Haney, the retired president of Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce. “With his tireless cheerleading, Tommy took the positive tact that things could be better and went about dealing with big issues -- all tied to getting back to work.”

Former Senate Majority Leader Tim Cullen, a Democrat who joined Thompson’s administration early as secretary of Health and Social Services, shared that memory.

“(Thompson’s) role as ‘cheerleader in chief’ on jobs issues was his greatest contribution. His willingness to call any business leader and go visit any person that could help create jobs in Wisconsin was well known and could only have helped,” Cullen said.

Former Revenue and Administration Secretary Bugher recalled Thompson’s cheerleader style extended to creating mini-ambassadors among the rank-and-file, from people in small towns across Wisconsin to state employees who needed to know they were appreciated.

At a time when more limited-term employees were necessary to process income tax returns around the April 15 filing deadline, Thompson would show up to shake hands, ask questions and roam the floor of the Department of Revenue’s processing bullpen.

“They were always excited to see him and talk about their work,” Bugher said, adding with a laugh: “Although I sometimes wound up parceling through the promises later.”

Bill McCoshen was secretary of Commerce for nearly four years beginning in late 1994, and often had a front-row seat for Thompson’s pep talks to crowds large and small.

“He raised everyone’s spirits,” said McCoshen, who heads one of Wisconsin’s largest lobbying firms today. “He was the consummate optimist, and it didn’t matter if you were a Republican or a Democrat. Almost everyone seemed to react to it.”

While most people may remember Thompson as perpetually “on” in terms of his personality, McCoshen recalled he would sometimes work himself into exhaustion while on extended trips.



“Before he would go into a room, he would sometimes need to ‘rev’ himself up by taking a power nap on the plane or in the back of the car,” McCoshen said. “But whoever was near him when he woke up was in harms’ way” if Thompson needed to fight through a grumpy fog.

“Everyone knew it wasn’t personal, however. It was just about him getting fired up,” McCoshen said.

Tommy the Builder

When newly elected President George Bush asked Thompson to join him in Washington, Thompson’s first choice for a cabinet secretary position was Transportation – not Health and Human Services, where he served for four years.

There was a reason for that: Tommy loved building and fixing roads, bridges, railroads and just about anything else that helped people and goods move from Point A to Point B.

He was named to Amtrak’s board of directors by President Clinton, served as chairman and even had a passenger train named in his honor for five years. A mass transit supporter, he often drew skeptical reactions from Republicans on that issue.

Those same Republicans loved Thompson’s affinity for asphalt and concrete, however. His tenure was marked by improvements to Highways 29, 53, 151 and 51, often at great cost but, Thompson believed, to the advantage of the state economy.

“We needed to make our roads safer and to get goods and services to market,” Thompson recalled in an interview. “There was a lot of concern about the number of accidents and the overall safety of the roads back then, particularly Bloody 29. We fixed that.”

Assembly Speaker Tom Loftus, who ran against Thompson in 1990 and later served as U.S. ambassador to Norway, said those highway improvements were financed in part by a holdover idea from Earl’s administration – gasoline tax indexing. It was a formula that tied state taxes to the ups and downs of fuel prices.

“He kept the indexing that Democrats had passed and this allowed for a decent transportation infrastructure during his time,” Loftus said.

The UW System also benefited from a building boom during Thompson’s tenure, best illustrated by the “BioStar” projects on the UW-Madison campus. Those buildings notably included the Biotechnology Center, Microbial Sciences and Biochemistry. After Thompson left office, Gov. Jim Doyle recast the remaining BioStar money to help build the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery, one of the only multi-disciplinary research buildings of its type in the Midwest.



Not without sharp disagreement over its location and public financing, Miller Park was planned, designed and constructed during Thompson's time, opening a few months after Thompson left office in 2001. One of the largest construction projects in Wisconsin history, it was built with \$290 million in public funds that included a special sales tax applied to five southeastern Wisconsin counties.

The state senator who cast the deciding vote in the funding bill, Republican George Petak, lost a recall election because of his support. Thompson seemed somehow above the storm, which was not uncommon for a governor whose wardrobe included a few Teflon suits.

Then there were prisons. And more prisons. And still more prisons.

A timeline published by the state Department of Corrections (which became a cabinet-level agency under Thompson) lists nearly two-dozen construction projects from 1987 to 2001. Collectively, they added about 8,100 beds at all security levels.

"In his defense, it was a time when politicians of all stripes were 'getting tough on crime' and responding to public pressure," Bugher recalled. "But I have to admit it was interesting to sit through meetings with local Chamber of Commerce leaders across Wisconsin and listening them say they wanted a prison because it was economic development."

As Thompson looks back on the prison building boom, he admits it's a costly legacy that should adapt to changing times.

He thinks state policymakers should convert a prison into a vocational "academy," where prisoners who have clean incarceration records can apply for course work to better prepare them for life outside the correctional system.

"It would be a way to work your way out of prison, just like you worked your way into prison," Thompson said.

Tommy the Techie

Not every governor would spend hours peering into microscopes or talking with researchers about the details of genomics and biotechnology. In a political world where 15-minute meetings were the norm, however, Thompson stood out as an intellectually curious geek.

Michael Sussman, a biochemist and startup company founder who leads the UW-Madison Biotechnology Center, recalls meeting in Thompson's Capitol office with then-Provost John Wiley in the 1990s. They spent two hours explaining to the intrigued governor how DNA works, the foundations of the Human Genome Project and why biotechnology was more than just another science but a huge business opportunity for Wisconsin.



“He couldn’t get out of my office because I asked so many questions,” Thompson recalled of his meeting with Sussman. “But I could see the future.”

It was a discussion that helped pave the way for BioStar and faculty “cluster” hires that expanded the talent pool for UW-Madison.

“I also visited with Tommy several more times and he also visited the Biotechnology Center (where) I showed him the first Maskless Array Synthesizer, which was an instrument that allowed us to make DNA chips in a completely new way and which was being invented in the biotechnology center,” Sussman recalled.

New York native Sussman was later being recruited by the University of California-Davis. When Thompson heard, he called Sussman at home and urged him to stay. Sussman did.

“I credit Tommy Thompson with putting us on the map of genomics and biotechnology,” Sussman said. “He really helped to kick-start the research engine at UW-Madison. It all started with Tommy’s amazing interest and faith, and his very enthusiastic backing for the field of genomics.”

Others recall how Thompson stood up for human embryonic stem cell research in Wisconsin at a time when developmental biologist Jamie Thomson was pioneering the science on the Madison campus. Thomson was the first to isolate human embryonic stem cells in an undifferentiated state, meaning the cells were alive but not transforming themselves into the 220 or so adult cell types that make up the human body.

Because those cells came from embryos slated to be destroyed by fertility clinics, the research came under fire from pro-life advocates.

“He was really raked over the coals by the right-to-life movement for that,” Bugher recalled, “but I remember a particular meeting in which Tommy heard them out and then, falling back on what he had learned about the science and the ethics of it, responded by saying he wanted to cure diseases and to create jobs by doing that. He said he didn’t want to stop research in its tracks because you never know where it might lead.”

Thompson’s defense of stem-cell research continued during his tenure as Health and Human Services Secretary, where he was primarily responsible for persuading President Bush to “grandfather” existing stem cell lines. Five of those lines were produced at UW-Madison, where research continues and has sparked some of the private companies and jobs Thompson imagined.

Moreover, Thompson’s belief that research will find its own path proved correct. Most stem-cell research today involves cells that were reverse-engineered, thus reducing the need for discarded embryos.



Tommy the Dealmaker

Thompson loved the art of the deal. The Motorola recruitment bid, extending the life of the General Motors plant in Janesville (it eventually closed in 2009) and wrangling some short-lived concessions out of Chrysler before it shut its Kenosha plant were all high-profile examples of Thompson wading in and getting much more than his feet wet.

Rolf Wegenke, who served five Wisconsin governors in various roles, said Thompson never gave up hope in Kenosha.

“No one worked harder and made more of a difference (than Thompson),” said Wegenke, who now heads the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. “It was a multi-year effort to preserve American motors in Kenosha and, then, when Chrysler pulled out of Kenosha, he worked to rebuild – and actually expand – Kenosha’s economy.”

There was likely never a chance the ancient Kenosha plant would remain open – and Thompson knew that – but he kept up the pressure on Chrysler executive Lee Iacocca, who he accused of breaking a promise to Kenosha workers and the community by shutting down the former American Motors plant so soon after it was purchased.

At one point, Iacocca fumed he had been “tried, convicted and hung in effigy in Kenosha,” but Chrysler wound up keeping the plant open four months longer than expected and putting \$20 million into a trust fund for displaced workers. Neither concession would have happened, most observers agreed, without Thompson’s role and his willingness to enlist others.

“Part of Governor Thompson’s success was that he had everyone involved,” Wegenke said. “For the (Kenosha) project, he enlisted former Gov. Pat Lucey and former WMC President Paul Hassett to take leadership roles. Not only did this build support, it made for a better product.”

“Everyone” often included trade unions, whose members seemed to identify with the son of a grocer from Elroy. They sensed Thompson cared about them and their families.

“Nothing made Tommy happier than to see a carpenter at work, a road builder at work,” said Scott Jensen, who served as Thompson’s chief of staff from 1989 to 1991. “These were his people. They reminded him of the people with whom he grew up.”

Thompson also understood the importance of trade to the Wisconsin economy and committed himself to two trade missions per year, usually engaging in more. He tripled the number of Wisconsin’s overseas offices and tried to strike a balance between promoting exports and attracting foreign direct investment to Wisconsin.



Thompson's first European mission closed the deal on four companies locating facilities in Wisconsin. Today, there are 1,537 foreign-owned establishments in Wisconsin with a total of 86,440 jobs, a testament to the enduring nature of Thompson's interest in creating a more competitive, globalized Wisconsin economy.

"He was a consummate deal-maker," Bugher recalled. "He would take a personal interest in a particular project and it wouldn't be unusual to see him involved, right until the end, on the details."

Tommy the Manager

Former Chief of Staff Scott Jensen recalls looking up from his Capitol desk and seeing people walking into Thompson's office without any known appointment.

"It happened a lot," Jensen recalled. "It was often someone who had called or spoke to the governor the day or evening before and he would say, 'Come in to see me tomorrow'."

Thompson was a poster child for "management by walking around," a term that describes managers whose style includes wandering through the workplace, sometimes randomly, to check with employees and others on how things are going.

It wasn't uncommon for a mid-level state employee to come up with an idea and run it directly past the governor, who would sometimes walk the idea back through the ranks to see if it had merit.

Because he was a lawyer and former legislator, Thompson was accustomed to reading the fine print in bills and budget proposals. Many a surprised state worker would pick up the telephone to hear Thompson's voice on the other end, looking for more detail.

Jensen and others recall Thompson's ability to out-work everyone else, especially if he thought an economic development opportunity was on the line.

"People forget how hard he worked," McCoshen said. "It set the tone for the rest of us."

Added Wegenke: "I will say he drove his staff to work incredibly hard – as hard as he, himself worked – but he also backed up his staff when the going got tough."

Tommy the Lucky

Thompson took office in 1987 when the U.S. economy was already beginning to turn. Former Gov. Earl and the Democratic Legislature had raised sales taxes and enacted an income-tax surcharge in the wake of the recession, so the state's budget was balanced.



“The Clinton years of peace and prosperity gave Tommy money to spend and spend he did,” Loftus said. “You make a lot of friends that way – no interest group went away mad.”

During Thompson’s time in office, state general-purpose spending rose from \$5.2 billion to \$11.3 billion, according to the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. By the time Lt. Gov. Scott McCallum took over the reins in 2001, there was a structural deficit of roughly \$1 billion.

A Democratic legislative majority for much of his tenure meant Thompson was also spared challenges from his political right.

“(Thompson) didn’t have to fight the cultural wars because nothing would reach his desk. The Republican minority that had been divided into factions before his election now had to act responsibly,” Loftus said.

WMC’s Haney agreed Thompson benefited from an economy coming out of recession, “but leadership at the top is essential to inspiring business leaders to invest. The proof is in the pudding.”

William Kraus, who worked in a lead role for former Gov. Lee Dreyfus, said it’s not uncommon for politicians to benefit from actions and events around them. Thompson was no exception.

“There isn’t a hell of a lot governments can do except take advantage of a tide running their way. Both Clinton and Thompson did that,” Kraus said. “Tommy the activist used the money that flowed in to build the state infrastructure, which is a lot more than roads and bridges. He put money in the UW and education at all levels, which is what businesses looking to move or expand (notice).”

“Tommy made his own luck. He did it be out-working everyone else and being in the right place at the right time,” McCoshen said.

For what it’s worth, Thompson would agree.

“Luck is always better than skill. I came at the right time. I had novel ideas across the board,” he said. “I could get people to buy into my ideas because I was so fervent about it. Plus, I have always been amazed by how much people in Wisconsin will volunteer to do something. You just have to ask them, and it’s amazing how much you can do when you don’t care who gets the credit.”

What worked and what didn’t

Thirty years after Gov. Tommy Thompson took office, the state’s economy is more diverse and resilient than it was in the mid-1980s. While manufacturing, agriculture and tourism still form the Holy Trinity of the Wisconsin economy, the foundation was laid for more



vibrant technology sectors, the rise of financial and professional services and other jobs that leverage the global nature of the 21st century economy.

The beginnings of a broader foundation could be seen during the 1990-91 U.S. recession, when Wisconsin performed better than the nation and emerged sooner from the chasm. Wisconsin's unemployment increased by 45,000 jobs from mid-1990 to April 1991, when the jobless rate peaked at 5.7 percent. Employment soared over the next seven quarters, however, a period when Wisconsin jobs grew from 2.46 million to 2.58 million – an increase of more than 100,000.

Thompson's holistic view of economic growth also endures. He viewed education and welfare reform as ways to ensure long-term growth by producing a stronger workforce.

Some opportunities were missed or misplayed, however.

Wisconsin's insurance industry – a historic strength – would be even more robust today if the state had updated codes and regulations that would have kept a half-dozen insurance headquarters in Wisconsin.

Miller Park has been a successful venue for baseball's Brewers, but it might have provided even more economic advantages had it been constructed in the city's downtown, much like stadiums in Baltimore, Cleveland and Denver.

Legalized gambling in Wisconsin has not been the property tax panacea predicted when voters approved the lottery and on-track, pari-mutuel wagering on races in 1987. The state's obsession with dog tracks was nothing short of a disaster, with five tracks operating at one point in the 1990s and none today. The last track to close was in 2009.

Thompson built an enduring "bench" of talent that can be found in positions of influence, public and private, to this day. They're leaders steeped in the belief that government should be a tool to accomplish goals, not simply a barrier to tear down.

Thompson built a bench but not a succession plan, which left Lt. Gov. Scott McCallum ill-prepared to win election to a full term in 2002 after Thompson left for Washington, D.C. That may have created an opening for a generation of Republicans – nationally and in Wisconsin – who sometimes put ideology ahead of making government work.

Three decades after he took office, however, it is difficult to imagine Wisconsin without Tommy Thompson.

"He was the right guy for that period," Bugher concluded. "A different personality as governor would have meant a much different outcome for the state."



Still is president of the Wisconsin Technology Council, which is an independent, non-profit science and technology advisory board to the governor and Legislature. It was incorporated in 2001 shortly after Thompson announced its creation at the 2000 Wisconsin Economic Summit. Still is the former associate editor of the Wisconsin State Journal and a former political reporter.

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