

5 Lakes Institute

John Byrnes, Chairman Biography

John Byrnes is a lawyer and private equity investor who earned a highly respected reputation in commercial banking, corporate finance, and venture capital during his 40-year professional career in the financial services industry. He is Founder and retired Chairman and Executive Managing Director of Mason Wells, a top-tier, Midwest-focused private equity firm.

In late 2000, John was asked to serve as a founding member of the Wisconsin Technology Council. John and a group of private and public sector thought leaders who were chosen by then-Governor Tommy Thompson examined the state's competitive posture and made recommendations for expanding and accelerating the technological innovation agenda of the state's economy.

While involved with the Tech Council, John led a committee to examine the role of new science in materials, genomics, semiconductors, and software for the potential expansion of the high-technology segments of Wisconsin's GDP. The work of the committee led to the publication of a comprehensive report, entitled [Vision 2020](#), that looked at the future possibilities of a Wisconsin high-tech economy.

After the publication of Vision 2020, John was instrumental in organizing and funding the first Wisconsin Entrepreneur Conference and Governor's Business Plan Contest, annual activities that continue to this day. John's work on the Technology Council helped to encourage three successive, state-wide Economic Summits organized by the University of Wisconsin to promote closer collaboration with leading members of the Wisconsin business community.

From 2002-2006, John was a member of the Wisconsin Governor's Economic Growth Council, where he proposed and sponsored legislation to permit angel investors to write off part of their venture capital commitments at the time of the investment. This tax credit legislation is now heralded for dramatically increasing the availability of early-stage venture capital in the Wisconsin and has been copied in many other states.

In 2007, John founded and funded the Milwaukee Institute, a non-profit organization dedicated to encouraging the use of High-Performance Computing (HPC) to solve business and research problems. As Chairman of the Milwaukee Institute he was instrumental in the construction of the Potawatomi, Class 1 Data Center in Milwaukee and the decision to link it to the State of Wisconsin's Class 1 facility in Madison with a 100Gig dual redundant fiber optic network, the first of its kind in the state.

For more than 10 years John also served on the Board of Trustees of the Medical College of Wisconsin, where he helped to finance genomic research and clinical translational research that frequently used the Milwaukee Institute's HPC resources. He has served on countless other corporate boards and is still involved as a Director with selected companies

John has been actively involved in efforts to encourage new business formation in the Midwest region and to enhance the regional ecosystem for scaling up technology-rich businesses. John is a frequent public speaker and he continues to donate time and money to many civic and business organizations that promote the development of a more robust technological and entrepreneurial landscape in Milwaukee, the State of Wisconsin, and the broader Great Lakes region.

John began his business career in 1971 doing debt restructuring, corporate re-organizations, and debtor-in-possession financing in bankruptcy and pre-bankruptcy situations. He joined the Marshall & Ilsley Bank in 1977, where he did merger and acquisition financing and multi-bank credit agreements. In 1982 he organized the private equity arm of the M&I Corporation; for 15 years he led the team that successfully invested \$200 million of bank capital in more than 30 venture capital and private equity investments.

In response to the pressures of banking regulations at the time, John managed the 1998 spinout of M&I's private equity team into Mason Wells, a newly-formed, equity investment firm that under his leadership as Chairman and Executive Managing Director successfully raised and deployed more than \$1 billion in three independent buyout funds. All three funds had top-decile performance. Shortly after John's retirement in December of 2015, Mason Wells raised \$615 million for Mason Wells Buyout Fund IV, making it the largest independent private equity investment firm in Wisconsin.

John currently runs his family office, where he manages a small portfolio of direct investments in early stage, technology businesses. His close friends describe John as a man who is failing his retirement.

John received his law degree from the University of Wisconsin Law School and his undergraduate science degree from the University of Notre Dame. John was admitted to the Wisconsin Bar Association in 1977 when he returned from short stints in Washington, California, and Texas.