

Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker's Ten Important Lessons for Local Governments with Tight Budgets

Set an example. When I first took office, the County Executive was paid more than the Governor. Since taking office, I have given back some \$360,000 of my personal salary. I lowered my take home pay and it gave me the moral authority to make tough budget decisions.

Focus on priorities. Even with a tough budget, we exempted public safety and direct patient care from our cuts.

Share the sacrifice. Instead of laying off hundreds of workers, we proposed a 35-hour workweek for all employees (except the public safety and patient care jobs that are 24/7). Everyone takes a little hit so hundreds don't lose their jobs.

Ask untouchables for help. While we did not mandate reductions in the courts or Sheriff, we did ask for their help in reducing administrative and overtime costs.

Enforce the budget limits. We gave budget goals to all departments. Nearly all of them hit their budget target, but a few met it by proposing cuts they knew would cause a public outcry and then be restored. So, we re-wrote their budgets and found other reductions. By the next budget, these departments were much more aggressive in meeting their goal.

Ask the public for help. We hold Interactive Budget Briefings each year before budget requests are submitted. While budget hearings held by the legislative branch often get spenders asking for more support, our briefings often get people with new ideas on how to save money.

Be innovative. For years, our parks system hired full-time employees to work all year on entry-level tasks. We proposed eliminating the full time positions and replace them with seasonal employees who work from late spring to early fall. Without the full benefit load, we save millions while actually adding more hours of labor during the prime times of use.

Have a plan. Don't make cuts just for the sake of reducing spending, but with a plan that provides a different way to provide the program or service.

Be firm, but fair. We made changes in our social services as well as in our cultural attractions. Just because more people use a service doesn't mean it should be off limits.

Let the public know. We started out with a "Reality Tour" that talked about the financial situation of the county. It got the attention of business, civic and foundation leaders. It also got the attention of the media and – eventually – the public. Once they understand the significance of the fiscal situation, they are better able to appreciate the choices we have and the decisions being made.