

Building a New Vision of Hope

Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker

Property taxes are too high. So, for the 5th straight year, I introduced a budget with no increase in the property tax levy from the previous year. This is good news for seniors living on fixed incomes and it's also good news for young families struggling to pay the mortgage. Plus, there are no increases in the sales tax or any other tax in our 2007 budget proposal.

Getting to a balanced budget was not easy considering our \$89.9 million shortfall (largely driven by costs of pension, other retirement and health care benefits). Now, our budget seeks to tear down the old and build a new vision of hope for Milwaukee County.

Public safety is also a priority in our budget as the overall budget for Sheriff's Department is one of the few to receive an increase. We add more funding for Parks Patrols and limit the number of services that duplicate the work of local police departments. Our budget also adds resources to our programs to keep young people out of the juvenile justice system.

The Milwaukee County EMS system is one of the best in the nation. We continue our support so that everyone in the county has access to our excellent paramedics.

Protecting our parks is also a priority and one of the ideas I continue to champion is an elected Park District. It works well in numerous locations across the country and is a perfect way to protect our parks from the pension and state mandate costs faced by the county.

In 2007, our budget calls for moving our aquatic system into the 21st century. Seven deep-well pools remain open plus our water park Cool Waters. We propose building a new water park on the northside of the county. In addition, we will add six more splash pads and will start an Adopt-A-Beach program to staff Bradford and McKinley beaches with lifeguards. Parks will also add season passes (\$10 kids and \$15 adults).

The budget calls for 21 new family picnic sites, replacing worn out playground equipment and continued maintenance on facilities and trails. In addition to the parks, our budget continues support for the zoo.

In the area of human services, our budget includes a bold initiative to provide quality house for people with mental illness. There are also new positions to monitor the 825 child care centers in the county, support for the General Assistance Medical Program (GAMP) that provides health care coverage for the poor and additional help for people with disabilities.

The meal programs for older adults and our senior centers receive support in the budget. FamilyCare – which provides long-term care for older adults – continues to grow. And we continue our support for the many veterans in our county in this budget.

To promote economic growth, our budget adds positions to help convert county assets into economic prosperity. We also hope to use the positions to assist in the development of a Community and Economic Development fund to jump start new businesses and projects.

Originally, the transit system proposed cutting routes and raising fares. After hearing from many people who would lose access to their job, we restored the routes. The cash fare remains the same while the discount on passes is reduced in this budget.

To lower our pension liability, we issue Pension Obligation Bonds. It is like moving debt from a high interest card to a lower interest card. It is a long-term way of getting control of this debt and reducing our annual payments.

Since the county fringe benefit rate is so high (78%) because of benefit costs, the 2007 budget includes the reduction of positions (393) and contracting out for services (115). The savings are used to fund vital county services.

It is also important to know that out of the \$89.9 million needed to balance this budget, the state will only allow the county to increase the property tax levy by under \$10 million. In other words, county officials have some difficult decisions to make in the future, but we've done it before and we get do it again now.

Next, the members of the county board will have an opportunity to review our budget proposal. It is my hope that we can set aside our political and personal differences and agree on a new vision of hope to make this county great again.