

## **Building a New Vision of Hope**

Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker

Since the beginning of the year, I tried to warn of the financial challenges for our county. In 2007, we face an \$89.9 million shortfall. Over the next five years, there is a \$300 million gap. The rising costs of the infamous pension, retirement benefits, health care coverage and state mandates are the driving forces for the structure imbalance.

The 2007 budget takes on the pension liability and includes changes for health care. Despite the headlines, our budget is filled with a vision of hope for Milwaukee County.

Public safety is 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 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 has access to our paramedics.

Protecting our parks is a priority and I continue to champion 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.

Our budget moves the aquatic system into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Seven deep-well pools remain open plus our water park Cool Waters. We also propose building a new water park on the northside. In addition, we add six more splash pads and start an Adopt-A-Beach program to staff Bradford and McKinley beaches with lifeguards.

The budget calls for 21 new family picnic sites, replacing worn out playground equipment and continued maintenance on facilities and trails.

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.

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 fund to jump start new businesses and projects.

Originally, the transit system proposed cutting routes and raising fares. After hearing from many people, 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, the county will issue Pension Obligation Bonds. It is like moving debt from a high interest card to a lower interest card and 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%), the 2007 budget includes a reduction of positions (393) and contracting out for services (115). The savings are used to fund vital county services.

And for the 5<sup>th</sup> straight budget, I did not increase the tax levy from the previous year. That is important, as we want to keep more people in their homes and more jobs in our county. Holding the line on taxes is key to our economic prosperity.

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.