

Park District - Overview

To create a Park District, the State Legislature and Governor must approve changes to the state statutes.

The proposed legislation would do the following:

- Require a referendum to be held in April of 2007 on the issue of an independent Park District within Milwaukee County.
- If the referendum question passes, the legislation would require that the total amount of tax levy included in the 2006 county budget be removed from the 2008 county budget.
- In turn, a new Park District would have the authority to levy a property tax up to the amount of the tax designated for the park system in the 2006 county budget.
- Both the county and the new Park District would continue to operate under the same property tax levy freeze limits currently imposed by the state government.
- If the referendum passed in April 2007, a date would be set to hold elections for the 7 Commissioners of the Park District.
 - Commissioners would be elected from across the Park District (county).
 - Commissioners would be volunteer, non-paid positions.
 - Commissioners would serve four-year terms.
- A majority vote of the Commissioners would be required to hire a director and the new director would hire staff for the Park District effective January 1, 2008.
- The legislation would also require Milwaukee County to transfer all of the property currently under the authority of the parks system to the Park District effective January 1, 2008 (assuming the referendum passed in April of 2007).

Park District Benefits

Tax Levy Neutral. The legislation would require the county to reduce the entire amount of the parks levy support from the county tax levy. At the same time, it would allow a new Park District to levy that same amount.

The county would continue to operate under the current tax levy freeze limits and this would prevent a major increase in the tax levy once the amount previously levied for the parks system was removed from the budget. In addition, the Park District would be under the same levy freeze limits as the county.

Cap Pension Burden. A new Park District would be free to hire or contract out for services, rather than continue employment with those receiving county benefits. This will cap the obligation to the county taxpayers and the Park District will be free to negotiate the terms of any future contract.

Accountable to Voters. An independently elected board would govern a new Park District. Unlike the technical school board or the sewerage district board, this would require them to be accountable to the voters.

County-wide, Non-paid. The board would be made up of 7 non-paid commissioners who would be elected on a countywide basis. This would prevent the current problem of elected officials only looking out for parks in their area. The seven can focus on the entire system.

Taxpayer Approval. Enabling legislation would require the approval of the taxpayers. Specifically, the bill should call for a referendum vote in April of 2007. If approved by the taxpayers, the new district would become effective January 1, 2008.

Alternative to Sales Tax. A Park District is a better alternative to a sales tax. With dramatic reductions in spending - all over county government – needed to balance future budgets, many people are concerned about the future of the parks system. This gives them a positive alternative to the current dilemma without the negatives of a sales tax increase.

Overall, an independent Park District allows us to protect the parks system while also protecting the taxpayers. It is also a great way to get the parks system out from under the weight of the costs of the pension deal and unfunded mandates.

Next year, the pension will cost the county taxpayers another \$59 million. In total, the county faces a \$90 million shortfall for 2007.

Even before the “pension scandal”, our parks faced declining support. In 1980, the parks received about 45% of the total tax levy. By 2000, that had dropped to under 10%. Today, it is 7.95% of the total tax levy.

Places like Minneapolis and Chicago have successful Park Districts. Milwaukee County can too.