

The budget request for 2007 from the Milwaukee County Parks System calls for the closing of 43 deep-well and wading pools. In response to likely reductions in the tax levy support for the parks system, several Supervisors proposed a variety of new sales taxes – ranging from .25% to a full 1%.

Recently, County Executive Scott walker vetoed the resolution calling for a referendum on a .5% sales tax increase. Besides political and economic concerns with a new sales tax, the simple fact is that the new funds will not go to the parks. Instead (in light of an actuarial finding that the pension system will need \$59 million in tax levy in 2007), the new funds would go to pay for the 2007 pension contribution.

Even before the “pension scandal” in 2001, the parks faced declining support. In 1980, the parks received about 45% of the total tax levy. By 2000, that had dropped to approximately 10%. Today, it is 7.95%.

### **So what is the answer? A Park District.**

First, a Park District is a proven idea. There are more than 300 park districts in Illinois – Chicago being the largest. The same is true in the Twin Cities, Oakland and many other places across the country. In fact, the majority of the top award-winning parks systems are park districts.

Second, a Park District is tax neutral. The enabling legislation will 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 Parks District to levy that identical amount. With a tax levy freeze currently mandated on the county by state government, this would prevent the county from raising the tax levy to make up for the full amount of the parks system. At the same time, the Parks District would be under the identical levy freeze limits as the county.

Third, an independently ELECTED board would govern a new Parks District. Unlike the technical school board or the sewerage district board, this would require them to be accountable to the voters.

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Fifth, enabling legislation should 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.

Sixth, it 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 Parks District allows the public 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.