

The budget request for 2007 from the Milwaukee County Parks System called for the closing of 43 deep-well and wading pools. At the same time, several Supervisors proposed a variety of new sales taxes – ranging from .25% to a full 1%.

Technically, state government must approve any increase in the sales tax. Both candidates for Governor and the leaders of the Legislature oppose a new or increased tax. Also, the \$60 million tax increase would make Milwaukee County a full 1% higher than two of the neighboring counties. This would create a tax island.

Besides political and economic concerns with a sales tax increase, the simple fact is that the new funds will not go to the parks. Instead, the new funds would go to pay for the \$59 million pension contribution.

Support for the parks is not a recent problem. 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 in Illinois – including Chicago. There are districts in the Twin Cities, Oakland and other places across the country. The majority of the top award-winning parks systems are park districts.

Second, a Park District is tax neutral. The county would reduce the entire amount of the parks levy support from the tax levy. A new Parks District would levy the same amount. With a tax levy freeze currently mandated on the county by state government, this would prevent the county from raising the tax levy. 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.

Fourth, 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.

Fifth, the employees of the Park District will no longer be county employees. This means that the liability for pension and other retirement benefits will be capped at the start of the district.

Sixth, it is a better alternative to a sales tax. With dramatic reductions needed to balance future budgets, many people are concerned about the future of the parks system. This is 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 and other retirement benefits and from unfunded state mandates.

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 Commissioners of the Park District. Commissioners would be volunteer, non-paid positions and would be elected in nine geographical districts.
- 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).
- The legislation would allow other areas of the state to create a park district through a resolution by the governing body or passage of a referendum.

Process to enact a Park District

- **Fall 2006:** Finalize draft of legislation; organize supporters; seek co-sponsors
- **January 2007:** Introduction of legislation; lobby for quick passage
- **February 2007:** Deadline to get referendum question on the April 2007 ballot
- **Feb. – April 2007:** Campaign to make public aware of benefits of Park District
- **April 2007:** Spring general election and earliest passage of referendum
- **Fall 2007:** Election of Park District Commissioners
- **January 2008:** Transfer of parks from Milwaukee County to new Park District

Park District Benefits

Proven Success. There are more than 300 park districts in Illinois. Chicago has a very successful park district. The same is true in the Twin Cities and in Oakland and many other places across the country. In fact, the majority of the top award-winning parks systems are park districts.

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.

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. Commissioners would be non-paid and would be elected in nine geographical districts.

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.

Cap Pension Burden. Once the parks system and employees were transferred to a new Park District, Milwaukee County would be free of future pension and other retirement burdens for the employees of the Park System.

Alternative to Sales Tax. A Park District is a better alternative to a sales tax. A .5% increase in the sales tax would generate \$60 million per year while the project pension system contribution in 2007 is \$59 million. Any new tax would not go to parks, but to pensions. A Park District gets the parks away from the drain of the pension scandal.

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 pension and retirement costs and unfunded mandates.

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

Many other places across the country have formed park districts to protect their park systems. Milwaukee County can too.