

TO: Sen. Alberta Darling and Rep. Jeff Stone
FR: County Executive Scott Walker
DT: Friday, June 23, 2006
RE: Independently elected Parks District

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%.

On Wednesday, I vetoed the resolution calling for a referendum on a .25% sales tax increase. Besides my 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 more in tax levy in 2007), the new funds would go to pay for roughly half of the pension contribution.

Even before the “pension scandal” in 2001, our parks faced declining support. In 1980, the parks got about 45% of the total tax levy. By 2000, that had dropped to about 10%.

So what is the answer? A Parks District.

We talked about this idea in the past and I know that you had some concerns. Still, I believe that we can address those concerns in legislative language and still work to save the parks system.

First, the legislation should 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 same amount. With a tax levy freeze currently in place for the county (via state law), this would prevent the county from raising the tax levy to make up for the full amount of the parks system. In addition, the Parks District would be under the same levy freeze limits as the county.

Second, a new Parks District would be empowered to hire new staff. This would remove the burden of the county pension and health care system. While the county cannot end the pension deal, a new Parks District is not bound by those agreements.

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, 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 7 commissioners can focus on the entire system.

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 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.

I am going to announce this proposal next week and would love to have your support by that time. Please feel free to contact me at 414/278-5262. Thank you for your attention to this important matter!