

VIA FACSIMILE

June 28, 2006

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State Capitol
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Dear Senator :

The budget request for 2007 from the head of the Milwaukee County Parks Department calls for the closing of 43 deep-well and wading pools. In response to potential 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%.

Besides our political and economic concerns with a new sales tax, the simple fact is that the additional 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 roughly half of the pension contribution.

The pension and retiree health care costs are the major reasons the county faces a \$90 million gap going into the 2007 budget. The property tax levy freeze limits set by state law would only allow for a \$7 million levy increase next year.

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

So what is the answer? A Park District.

Because you represent a part of Milwaukee County, we hope that you will be interested in supporting legislation to create a Park District within the county to protect our valuable parks system for generations to come. It works well in places like Minneapolis and Chicago and we believe it can work in Milwaukee too.

There are several reasons to support legislation to creation a Park District.

First, 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 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 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.

Third, 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.

Fourth, the board would be made up of 7 non-paid commissioners who would be elected on a countywide basis. The seven can focus on the needs of the entire system instead of just tending to parks in their own areas.

Fifth, enabling legislation would require the approval of the taxpayers. Specifically, the bill would 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 (i.e. that the new tax revenues would go to fund the pension).

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.

We are pleased to announce that we will once again push for the passage of legislation to create a Park District. For the good of our parks system, we hope that you will add your support to this legislation. In particular, we are hoping to get strong, bi-partisan support in both the Senate and Assembly to insure quick passage at the start of the legislative calendar.

Sincerely,

Scott Walker
Milwaukee County Executive

Alberta Darling

Wisconsin State Senate

Jeff Stone

Wisconsin State Assembly