

Wisconsin's economy has been the subject of numerous commentaries and reports. Without exception, the authors agree that fundamental change is necessary to put Wisconsin's economy back on track, and the first order is to change the way government does business.

That's what I've done for seven years as County Executive. It has not been easy. We've been engaged in perpetual battle with an entrenched establishment determined to maintain a status quo we can no longer afford.

Despite formidable opposition, we've had our share of successes.

Since taking office, we lowered the county debt by 10% and reduced the taxpayer-funded workforce by more than 20%. While Milwaukee County's bond rating had a negative outlook in 2002, Standard & Poor's recently ranked the county financial practices as "strong," and Moody's attributed the improvement to "strong management and prudent budgetary controls."

How did we control government spending?

We told department heads how much money they would have and asked them to prioritize spending based on available revenue. Together we crafted seven straight budgets with no increase in the property tax levy from the previous year. In 2008, when other state and local governments faced massive budget shortfalls, Milwaukee County had a budget surplus of more than \$4 million. And unlike the Governor who used his veto pen to increase spending, we used our veto authority to save taxpayers' money.

And we did it without sacrificing quality.

The Milwaukee County Parks Department is a top finalist for the prestigious 2009 National Gold Medal for Excellence as the best park system in the country. We can continue to preserve and improve our parks for less by replacing full-time parks employees with seasonal help who work when people are actually in the parks - a plan that will save taxpayers millions of dollars a year.

A recent state audit concluded that when compared to its peers, the Milwaukee County Transit System consistently delivers more rides for less cost, carries more riders per hour of service provided, and has the lowest per passenger expense and the highest ridership per capita.

And there are those who say we must either significantly raise taxes to fund our priorities or impose massive cuts in government service.

But our choices aren't limited to raising taxes or cutting services. Greater innovation will allow us to maintain essential government services without sacrificing community assets that enhance our quality of life.

General Mitchell International Airport is another award winning county asset. In 2008, Mitchell International served a record 8 million passengers and received the Transportation Safety Administration's Partnership Award. Since 2002, we've invested \$199 million dollars in airport renovations and improvements, without increasing the property tax levy.

Clearly our investment has paid off for passengers and airlines alike, but we can do more. By contracting with a private vendor to manage airport operations, the county can actually turn a profit and use the revenue to pay down debt and help fund our mass transit system.

Since the airport isn't on the property tax levy, why not let it operate independently, or why not eliminate county government all together, consolidating services through state and municipal government and an independently elected parks and cultural district?

Milwaukee County is entirely comprised of incorporated cities and villages, increasing the chance that governments are duplicating services at the taxpayers' expense, and making it uniquely positioned for reform.

The largest portion of the county budget goes toward the administration of human service and criminal justice programs that are mandated by the state and provided with state and federal funds. Eliminating the county layer will make more funds available to support older adults and people with disabilities.

I campaigned on pledge to spend the taxpayers' money as if it were my own. I've kept that pledge and will do so again when I introduce my county budget in September.

Looking forward, I invite members of the County Board to join me - along with other economic development leaders - as we forge a unified strategy for retaining and attracting jobs. And as we look to the next county budget, we must embrace innovative ways to maintain essential services without raising taxes or sacrificing our quality of life.