

A sales tax for parks. A sales tax for cultural attractions. A sales tax for transit. A sales tax for “property tax relief.” Why not a sales tax for people with mental illness? Or one for more deputies on the lakefront? How about one for people with disabilities or one for programs for older adults? Where does it end?

Recently, a resolution calling for a referendum on a 1% (not .1%, but a full one percent) increase in the sales tax for parks, culture, transit and property tax relief. So why not support this proposal?

❑ First, it will give Milwaukee County the highest sales tax in the state – thus creating a “tax island”. The tax on a meal will be 6.85%. That means business – and jobs will go outside the county.

❑ Second, the state government still has to approve an increase in the sales tax. Last I checked both candidates for Governor and the leaders of the State Legislature were opposed to new taxes. In other words, residents could be dragged through this entire debate only to find out that the state says no.

❑ Third, it hasn’t worked before. In 1991, the county enacted a .5% sales tax increase for “property tax relief.” From 1992 to 2002, the property tax levy went up 52%.

❑ Fourth, it is not that we don’t have enough money; it is that the county does not spend it well. Our parks system costs \$37 million. At the same time pensions will cost the county \$50 million and free health care for life and other retirement benefits will cost \$29 million in 2007.

The county fringe benefit rate exceeds 70%. It eats up the county budget like a virus. On top of that, state mandates in the courts and human services have taken tax levy from the parks for the past two decades. The best way to preserve our parks is get control over fringe benefits and to fight to reduce unfunded state mandates.

The answer is not to dig into the pockets of taxpayers for more money. Rather, we must be good stewards of our tax dollars by getting relief from fringe benefits and mandates. Only then will we see signs of hope for our county.