

**COMMITTEE CHAIR**

- Zoning, Neighborhoods and Development Committee

**COMMITTEE MEMBER**

- Steering and Rules Committee
- Public Works Committee
- Public Safety Committee



**JAMES A. BOHL, JR.**  
Alderman, 5th District

## Floated county taxi takeover ill-conceived

### Statement of Alderman Jim Bohl September 27, 2013

I am increasingly disturbed by media speculation and naïve political commenting giving any weight to the absurd trial balloon being floated by the Milwaukee County Board, expressing their desire to negotiate a “take-over” of taxicab regulation and licensing for the metro area. In my view, the County Board proposal is not serious, and giving any further weight to the “side show” idea only risks to further delay a reform process that has been dragged out for far too long.

Although I suppose there may be some good intentions with this request, I just cannot see the logic in anyone who would consider handing over taxi regulations to the County as remotely serious. Not only are we talking about a County Board that is in the midst of a major restructuring effort and facing massive staffing reductions, but the outcome of these changes threaten to result in both a substantial turnover with, and an increased instability in, both the Board and Board related administrative staffing and functions. On top of that, there is the issue over regular bouts of in-fighting between the Board and County Executive’s office, or with either and the Sheriff’s Department. Then there is the idea of further handing a tough administrative and regulatory responsibility to the county, which, as a governmental body, seems to continuously have key service responsibilities being stripped away and taken over by the state. As a rule, services aren’t typically taken over from local levels of government by the state because they are being operated well. The final straw in this is that I am not convinced that members of the Board have a sufficient understanding of the entire regulatory, administrative and legal process required for administering both taxicab (and other transportation services like limos, vans) and public passenger vehicle licenses in accord with state law.

The process requires routine monitoring of vehicles and drivers alike. Does the county have or is it even realistic to expect them to be able to set up the administrative process to handle this? There are criminal background checks required of hundreds of applicants that come with both new and renewal applications. While I know the Sheriff’s Department does background checks, is it prepared or able to create or expand a division to handle routine licensing when it seems to be continuously in the crosshairs of a staffing reduction? Then there is a legal hearing process that is quasi-judicial in nature and requires careful adherence to provisions protecting due process property rights with renewed licenses. Is there any understanding on the part of County Board members as to how this process would function on the Board, who would staff the hearings, how it would be administered, who would provide the legal advice, how appeals would be handled, etc.? Then we have street enforcement of various provisions of regulations. Milwaukee police make regular street inspections of taxis to insure compliance with regulatory requirements: taxis must have trip sheets, comment cards, proper display of licenses and

-More-

requirements for sealed meters, and that the vehicles are in proper and working appearance. Will the Sheriff's Department be able to devote resources to continue proactive investigation of these mundane regulations in place to protect riding consumers? Will the county be able to have sufficient staffing to run tests on meters or to set up sufficient and routine inspections of taxis that get pulled off the road for an accident and violation and need routine re-inspections to keep the owner and driver in business? How broad of an infrastructure system is in place in the County which, last I knew, administers the transit system through an outside contract? Have there not been a growing chorus of community detractors who have bemoaned a consistent decline consisting of rising fares and reduced service and routes to a once proud County run transit system?

Can anyone realistically -- considering any of the above points -- believe there is any chance of the County adequately running, let alone making any improvement to, the cab industry in Milwaukee? Shouldn't the city be asking the county to prove they could even begin to administer any part of taxi regulation and ask them to lay out their in-depth plan for improvement before any notion is given to wasting any city officials' time in entertaining negotiations? I'll give some sound advice to my colleagues in the city—let's not bother.

I think that what we need to understand is that the real issue facing the city is the cap on the number of permits established nearly two decades ago. There are always secondary issues over the quality of taxi service and that is something that should be scrutinized and fine-tuned in an ongoing manner. Yet, there seems to be a holding pattern at the city to have a review committee consider both issues (legal and service together) in one. This approach may be well intended but I do not think this is prudent. Action should be taken to resolve the legal issue surrounding the cap and any service issues can be worked on separately later. The other problem with delays in resolving the legal matters is that it allows for more opportunity for unrealistic and ridiculous ideas to get thrown into the mix. It is important that we not allow this to sidetrack us further.

To be frank, I fear there may be other issues at work behind the County's taxi proposal, and chief among them is state Rep. Joe Sanfelippo's familial involvement in the city's largest taxicab companies and his role in Act 14 that diminished the County Board. I also believe that some of the lukewarm "footsie playing" to this absurd negotiation discussion coming from a couple of my colleagues is rooted in general frustration with rampant allegations that have been lobbed over working conditions and driver treatment at the hands of these large taxicab companies, including those controlled by Sanfelippo's family.

Furthermore, I find the notion that the Mayor's Office is weighing in on the County resolution as unproductive. Chapter 62.11(5) of the Wisconsin Statutes and Chapter 100-1 of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances stipulates licensing regulation matters are exclusively under the legal purview of the Common Council, and so the Mayor has no pony in this race. As for my colleagues who are also chiming in, I believe it is time for them to stop enticing this unrealistic proposal, and time for us to address the legal issue on the cap before the court does it.

\*\*\*\*

**PLEASE NOTE:**

Alderman Bohl chaired the city's 2004-2005 Taxicab Improvement Task Force and also chaired the city's Taxicab Review Board during its three years of existence, from 2008 until 2011, before it was absorbed into the expanded reaches of the Public Transportation Review Board (created through legislation Alderman Bohl authored). Until recently, Taxicab and public passenger vehicle licenses fell under the jurisdiction of the former Utilities and Licenses Committee which Alderman Bohl spent 12 years on, including two stints as chairman. Currently the Public Safety Committee, which Ald. Bohl serves on, has jurisdiction over these matters.