

Statement of Common Council President Willie L. Hines, Jr.
August 29, 2007

The Milwaukee County Executive Needs a New Rallying Cry

The rallying cry for the Founding Fathers of our nation gave words to an inspired and visionary movement: “No taxation without representation.” Scott Walker’s rallying cry, on the other hand, appears short on inspiration and void of vision. Based on the action he took yesterday in vetoing a sales tax referendum, I can only conclude that his own personal rallying cry must be: “No taxation. Period.”

The County Executive should trust the citizens of Milwaukee County to express their own views about a potential 1-cent sales tax increase. But in an act of unabashed audacity, he has declared himself unwilling to give them a say in their local government. Perhaps a more apt rallying cry for Walker would be: “No taxation. And no representation, either.”

As a person, I like Scott Walker. But as a fiscal executive, he has led us to the brink of disaster. I am concerned not only as a resident of Milwaukee County, but also as a fellow elected official who represents many of the citizens who depend upon County services for their day-to-day lives.

“I refuse to raise taxes” is not a financial plan. Oftentimes, we in public service must make difficult decisions for the good of the people we represent. We have to ensure that roads are paved, bridges are stable, police are protected and bus lines are reliable. Ignoring these fiscal facts helps no one.

For Milwaukee County, the fiscal facts point to a sad state of affairs. Our bus system approaches bankruptcy, our parks continue to deteriorate, and our prison system is dangerously underfunded. Every County service has been cut to the bone – or beyond the bone. Unbelievably, we are now forced to close facilities that build up our communities and positively impact our children. The Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center, for example, was a safe haven for me and has been for generations of young people. The County, however, can no longer afford to keep its doors open.

Property taxes are too high and alternative revenue streams need to be identified in order to ease the burden. Across the country, people have come to the realization funding transportation systems with property taxes is a bad idea. We must learn the same lesson in Milwaukee. Switching the cost over to a miniscule sales tax increase is an idea worth exploring. Together we must work to connect individuals to opportunities – employees to work, employers to workers, patients to doctors, and students to educational institutions.

In short, things are not good for Milwaukee County. Actually, things are beyond bad. But the referendum offers an opportunity to address major financial shortfalls. Boosting our local transportation, services and infrastructure with a \$120 million sales tax is a perfectly reasonable solution. At the very least, it’s a solution that our citizens (throughout Milwaukee County and within the 15th District that I represent) should be able to evaluate for themselves.

Taxation is part of our democracy. So is representation. Let the people vote.

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