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Ald. Terry L. Witkowski

State rules hinder tax referendum on Milwaukee Police Dept. staffing surge

The proposed referendum to add a surge of 150 Milwaukee Police officers for five years is about to run out of time. According to **Alderman Terry L. Witkowski**, the measure's sponsor, state regulations dictated a window of August 16 to August 29 for the Common Council and the Mayor to act on it; absent any action within that timeframe, the city will have to wait another two years to put the issue to voters during a general election.

"I looked into this referendum because the cost of 150 additional officers is equivalent to operating three branch libraries, the Municipal Court, the Department of City Development and all functions of the Health Department that are not grant-funded," Alderman Witkowski said. "We run a frugal city. We can't simply 'cut' our way to the funding we need."

Alderman Witkowski said that, since 1989, budget cuts have already reduced the number of city employees from more than 11,000 to fewer than 7,000.

Any efforts to add officers via referendum would be further hampered by another state law that would penalize Milwaukee voters by \$17 million if they voted to raise taxes, Alderman Witkowski said. While the state's imposed 2004 tax levy cap allows municipalities to exceed the cap with a successful referendum vote, the 1990 "Expenditure Restraint Program," or ERP, would decrease state aid to the city by \$17 million as a penalty for the tax increase. Alderman Witkowski said this conflict was discovered while preparing the referendum resolution, and would raise the cost of the surge to \$87 million over five years.

"The plan recently drafted by the Public Safety Committee recommends adding officers and mentions a referendum as a potential funding source," Alderman Witkowski said. "But missing this impending deadline basically leaves us stuck for two years."

"It would have taken a special meeting of the Common Council to consider the matter, but I have been told that the ERP penalty and other concerns have caused a lack of interest in it," Alderman Witkowski concluded.