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Gambling Taxpayer Dollars on the Streetcar? Milwaukee is NOT Las Vegas

Statement of Aldermen Tony Zielinski, Bob Donovan, and Mark A. Borkowski
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This past week at the Public Works Committee meeting, my Common Council colleagues found out what I and other skeptics of Milwaukee's streetcar project have known or at least long suspected: That the operating expenses of the streetcar going forward would have to be subsidized by local tax dollars.

While the City of Milwaukee is receiving \$3.4 million in federal assistance in 2019 for the streetcar, that number goes down to \$0 at the end of 2020. Add in the fact that the City had to issue bonds – borrow money – to finance the streetcar. Partly due to excessive debt, the City's bond rating has been lowered, meaning we will pay more to borrow money and repay it.

Where will the money come from after 2020 to operate the streetcar? It is and was a legitimate and much-needed question to ask the Department of Public Works (DPW) and Mayor Barrett's administration. The answer: The City would divert money from its Parking Fund to keep the streetcar rolling on a 2.1 mile loop in downtown Milwaukee. There is no plan to begin charging a fare in November 2019 to help meet operating costs.

In budget years past, money from the Parking Fund had been allocated to the General Fund to pay for much-needed City services that benefit ALL City residents. If that money now goes to the streetcar, we will need to find funding to:

- Staff our protective services – Milwaukee Police and Fire departments – to help ensure our residents' safety;
- Repair our infrastructure such as reconstructing our crumbling streets, filling potholes, replacing our failing street lighting system, and making sure our alleys are back on a replacement cycle. There are \$0 allocated in 2019 for alley reconstruction;
- Plow and salt our roads safely, effectively and efficiently. The DPW Commissioner admits that his snow and ice removal workforce is understaffed which compromises each operation; and
- Replace lead service lines to address the problem of lead exposure affecting families who live in older housing stock in Milwaukee.

DPW officials are betting that revenue can be raised to operate the streetcar by selling ad space and sponsorships. My reply: Milwaukee is **not** Las Vegas. Betting taxpayer dollars on a project that never should have been built in the first place - much less expanded - is irresponsible, unsustainable, and dangerous.

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