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ROBERT G. DONOVAN
ALDERMAN, 8TH DISTRICT

It's time we rethink County government

Statement from Alderman Bob Donovan November 11, 2019

Late last week, I sent the **attached letter** to Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele which both thanked him for his service to the County but also asked him to seize what I believe is a generational opportunity to think about the structure of Milwaukee County government in new ways.

As difficult as the City of Milwaukee's financial and other challenges are – and they are real enough, Milwaukee County's are even more daunting. Consider just these examples:

*Deferred capital costs estimated as approaching \$1 billion, with the urgently-needed renovation of the criminal justice center expected to cost \$300 million alone.

*Structurally failing civic resources like the Mitchell Park Domes in my own district as well as the Public Museum.

*An inability to properly maintain the County park system.

*Ever-contracting bus routes serving a transit system that many have said is on a trajectory towards insolvency.

And there are others.

Making matters worse, there is no sign that the state Legislature will be proposing or permitting new sources of money any time soon.

Over the years, my colleagues and I have thought about the best way to organize the 19 communities that make up Milwaukee County. Some, like my former colleague Ald. Terry Witkowski, openly considered dissolving the County and devolving its responsibilities and authority to the municipalities.

Others, longer ago, spoke of metropolitan government like that in Indianapolis.

-More-

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And many more than these have urged all 19 communities to work together and share services to avoid unnecessary duplications. Modern technology has brought so much by way of improved communication and collaboration and it seems a shame that so little progress has been made even on seemingly obvious matters like shared public safety dispatch.

I don't pretend to know what the best solution is. With his decision not to seek re-election, however, the County Executive is uniquely positioned to reach out to a third-party entity and ask for recommendations as to the best way forward. Without the pressure of party or politics, he can simply ask: does this governmental structure, built generations ago, still make sense; and, if not, what should replace it?

As many of you know, I have elected not to run for re-election next Spring. Honestly, while I will miss public service, it can be freeing to look at situations without having to keep a weather eye on the next election. I strongly urge the County Executive to do the same as I have begun to fear that the tax-payers of this County are now trapped by a system that no longer serves them well and which they can no longer afford.

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ROBERT G. DONOVAN
ALDERMAN, 8TH DISTRICT

November 8, 2019

The Honorable,
Mr. Chris Abele
Milwaukee County Executive
c/o Milwaukee County Courthouse, Room 306
901 N. 9th Street
Milwaukee, WI 53233

Dear Mr. Abele:

Let me first thank you for your service to the residents of Milwaukee County. I have always believed public service to be a noble calling, the rewards for which come from unlooked-for places; I trust you will receive them. I sincerely hope that you and your family are able to take time away from center stage and that you will return soon to serve, perhaps in other ways.

As I, too, prepare to leave office in April 2020, I wanted to take a moment to ask you to think in a way that only someone not running for re-election can about the future of the institution you have served. For all the challenges faced by the City of Milwaukee, and they are legion, I believe those facing Milwaukee County are greater and certainly far more immediate. There are few institutions that could endure a deferred capital burden estimated to be approaching \$1 billion. I cannot imagine the pressure of trying to replace or renovate a criminal justice facility that will likely have a price tag north of \$300 million alone.

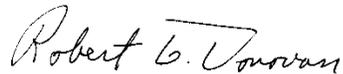
Beneath these hard numbers, though, I have long wondered about the less-visible costs of having both our 19 municipalities and the County provide services to our residents. Public safety, infrastructure maintenance, procurement, social welfare, public sanitation and health are all areas of overlap if not outright duplication. I know portions of the County have taken tentative steps towards consolidation, but even fairly obvious things like combined public safety dispatch have met with an opposition that I think is no longer affordable. To be direct, there are times when I feel we are taxing our citizens for a system of government shaped and informed by

the Eisenhower era. As much as I continue to like Ike, it is time to seek other options.

I would, therefore, urge you to reach out to some third party – perhaps the Public Policy Forum, but perhaps another – and commission it to study and then propose alternative structures for municipal government in Milwaukee County and for Milwaukee County itself. I would hope this investigation would be an open-minded one, perhaps not resulting in one solution but many. And I hope it would be bold, considering everything from metropolitan forms of governance to the devolution of Milwaukee County to its constituent municipalities. Nothing should be off the table. The present circumstances are far too urgent.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter. Should you have questions of me, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Respectfully,



Ald. Robert G. Donovan
Chair, Public Safety and Health Committee