
Common Council President



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Our City Needs Systemic Change

My son and I recently decided to go out to a Japanese restaurant for lunch. We were unsure which one would have the best hours, cuisine and location (and cost, of course) to suit our needs, so I left the room to get the local Yellow Pages. By the time I returned, Yellow Pages in hand – I had not even picked up the phone at this point – my 11-year-old daughter had already gone online and found the best option for us. It was evidence of a generational and technological shift. Needless to say, I was on the wrong side of the equation.

When it comes to our system for delivering services to Milwaukee residents, we have a Yellow Pages mindset in an age that demands 21st-Century solutions. We are operating with an outdated paradigm, and our citizens are paying the price.

Everyone knows that the City of Milwaukee faces fiscal challenges in crafting its 2009 budget. The Public Policy Forum recently addressed this topic in an op-ed for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Mayor Barrett has called it the “most difficult” budget he has ever faced. Our mayor is framing the argument for increased fees as a necessary evil that will limit cuts to libraries, the Milwaukee Police Department and the Milwaukee Fire Department. (As well as other departments.) He might be right – we may have to restore his proposed fee increases in order to get through 2009 – but merely getting through next year is not a long-term strategy.

Even if we manage to patch things together this year, 2010 will be here before we know it. I’m confident that 2011 will follow shortly after. Residents can’t take many more fee increases, even as the city must face its structural deficiencies. There is a stark reality that must be acknowledged: At this rate, unless dramatic structural changes occur or additional revenue streams are secured, we WILL close libraries and cut public safety. It’s just a question of when. We will get past 2009, but meanwhile we are putting off the inevitable unless systemic changes are implemented.

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Systemic Changes/ADD ONE

It is often said that the only thing constant is change, and that axiom is true in regard to how we must address future City of Milwaukee budgets. We have delivered services largely the same way for more than 100 years. It's time to turn our entire structure inside out and rethink the way we serve our residents. Change is imminent. Now is the time to ensure the long-term solvency of our city.

Whether the issue is consolidating libraries, streamlining departments or eliminating positions that have remained vacant, the City of Milwaukee must employ a long-term strategy that is rooted in our financial reality. Costs for energy and healthcare continue to rise. Milwaukee's portion of state shared revenue continues to decrease. We must work to control our own destiny as a city, while pushing for external circumstances to improve.

In addition to thinking differently about the services we provide, we are in need of a fresh perspective on how we bring revenue into the City of Milwaukee. Comptroller Wally Morics has put forth the intriguing idea of selling Water Works for the purpose of creating an endowment. This idea has merit, in my opinion. However, such a scenario may be a long way off. Another possible solution is to create private entities (probably LLCs) in partnership with city departments that can generate added revenue – a pseudo-privatization initiative – rather than completely giving up municipal control.

We could, for example, create a private LLC to work with the Sanitation Department. If deemed legal by the City Attorney's office, this entity would contract out garbage removal for special events or clients beyond Sanitation's current duties in serving citizens. It could compete in the private sector and provide another revenue stream to keep Milwaukee taxes in check. Likewise, other departments – Forestry? Snow Removal? Neighborhood Services? – could contract out appropriate services for additional revenue. Naturally, various issues with unions need to be ironed out, but it is a strategy worth pursuing.

These are the kinds of creative approaches that the City of Milwaukee must harness in order to be solvent beyond 2009. Raising fees and taxes ad nauseam just won't cut it. And failure to address our current financial reality will jeopardize Milwaukee's future prosperity. We might be used to the Yellow Pages, but sooner or later we have to get our city online.

President Willie Hines, Ald. Nik Kovac and Ald. Ashanti Hamilton will hold the Common Council's fourth and final public listening session on the 2009 City of Milwaukee budget tonight at 6 p.m. at Riverside High School.