

# **Alderman Donovan: The streetcar, public safety and our budget crisis, an honest assessment of Milwaukee's status quo**

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Last week a resident asked me “Bob, how do we right Milwaukee’s ship?” Quite frankly, all I could do was shake my head. I’ve been doing a lot of that lately. Between the streetcar debacle, the latest crime story or the Mayor’s proposed budget, which includes cutting cops, firefighters, closing firehouses and raising our taxes, there’s a lot to shake your head about.

Let’s take a look at the status quo in Milwaukee. First, let’s take a look at the positives. From Summerfest to our unique ethnic festivals, our great Universities, beautiful park system, major league sports teams and venues, the arts and our amazing downtown renaissance which includes the Couture, the new Bucks arena, and the new Northwestern Mutual building, just to name a few, Milwaukee has a lot to offer both residents and visitors.

Much of this downtown development has occurred under Mayor Barrett’s watch, and he deserves credit for that. But let’s not forget that most of these developments have required major public financing in one form or another and the average citizen of Milwaukee won’t realize a dividend from these developments for perhaps decades to come.

Now, let's take a look at public safety. The best word I can find to describe public safety in Milwaukee is "abysmal." There is no other way to describe it. Milwaukee's current murder rate is almost twice what it was during the first 2 years of Chief Flynn's tenure. By the way, that was also during a time when the MPD had approximately 300 more officers than we have today.

Ever wonder why you may wait hours for the police once you call?

Well, suck it up folks, because it only promises to get worse. Shots fired, non-fatal shootings, car jackings, stolen vehicles, mobile drug houses, street drug dealing, prostitution, human trafficking, a broken juvenile justice system, speeding, reckless driving, running red lights, pedestrian fatalities at record highs and nothing, and I mean nothing, being offered by the Mayor or the Chief to turn any of this around. Apparently this is the new norm and residents will just have to get used to it.

Let's take a look at the streetcar. From the beginning I had believed that the streetcar was a solution in desperate pursuit of a problem. It never enjoyed popular support, the Mayor fought against a referendum knowing what the results would be. The Mayor claims that there are no property tax dollars currently being spent on the streetcar. That may be accurate now during construction, but what about next year or the year after that? Or five or 10 years from now?

If the Mayor thinks fares and advertising are going to cover the operating and maintenance costs, he's deceiving himself. In addition, tapping into the parking fund would only divert that money from more pressing budget needs.

In my opinion, for the Mayor of the City of Milwaukee to saddle this community with unnecessary and frivolous obligations such as the streetcar, at a time when we are cutting police, cutting firefighters and closing fire houses is quite frankly the epitome of irresponsibility.

This brings me to the Mayor's proposed budget. Let's take a closer look at that, and we will cut right to the chase. The Mayor is proposing cutting 33 more police officers. Let's not forget folks that this is in addition to the hundred that have already been eliminated since 2008. He is also proposing eliminating 75 fire fighters and closing 6 fire houses.

None of Milwaukee's fiscal problems just fell on the City in 2017. They have been festering for years (all the more reason to point out the absurdity of taking on new

obligations such as the streetcar when the City is facing a fiscal crisis). This again I say is the epitome of irresponsibility.

The Mayor's desperate 11th hour attempt to secure a sales tax, and believe me, it was desperate since he asked for my help, only succeeded in pointing out his inability to get anything out of Madison and work in partnership with the Governor and the Legislature.

The Mayor loves to blame the Republicans in Madison and, by the way, they blame him. This partisan bickering may play well with some, but it's not solving Milwaukee's problems. It would seem to me we need a few more adults in the room.

Where is his plan for Milwaukee's future? How does he plan on diversifying Milwaukee's revenue sources? After all, he even admits that a ½ cent local sales tax is only a stop gap measure. After 3 or 4 years that money would all be eaten up and we would be back to square one. What kind of a city will we be leaving to our children and grandchildren?

Recently someone told me that as an Alderman, I am too negative. Well, I try to call 'em like I see 'em, and as an Alderman, I see and hear more than the average citizen.

If the Mayor were to say tomorrow he is going to stop even discussing the possibility of a streetcar expansion until we are able to get our fiscal house in order, I would be more optimistic. If the Mayor offered a solid plan in partnership with the Governor and the State Legislature to diversify Milwaukee's revenue sources and reduce property taxes, control spending and set Milwaukee on solid financial footing for decades to come, I'd have reason to be optimistic.

And finally, if the Mayor would keep his promise from a year ago and in conjunction with the Police Chief, offer a public safety plan that will restore order and stability to the beleaguered streets of Milwaukee, then I would have reason to be optimistic.

Sadly, none of these things have occurred, and I see no evidence that they will occur. For the sake of Milwaukee, the City I love and the City I grew up in, I hope I'm wrong, but I don't think so.