

Milwaukee County Exec. Abele: Milwaukee County Board Chairman requests \$20 Million in austerity measures

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MILWAUKEE – Come January 1st, 2018, Milwaukee County residents could see permanent “CLOSED” signs on all five County senior centers, Milwaukee County Parks King and Kosciuszko Community Centers, Boerner Botanical Gardens, the Mitchell Park Domes, and more. Milwaukee County Transit System bus routes would be eliminated, with significant route reductions to a dozen other routes that serve MATC and suburban job centers. The GO Pass program that provides discounted tickets to people with disabilities and seniors would also be eliminated. The Milwaukee County Veterans Services Office would cease the Needy Veterans Fund, which supports veterans facing eviction and utility disconnection. And millions of dollars for critical safety net housing services would be cut, including funding shelters, for homeless and those at risk for becoming homeless.

That’s if the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors passes a budget that includes the \$20 million in service cuts, layoffs, worker concessions, and other austerity measures that Milwaukee County Board Chairman Theo Lipscomb is demanding from County leaders.

Initiatives proposed by the county executive in his 2018 budget, including new resources to fight the opioid epidemic, investments in ending chronic homelessness,

and funding for successful workforce development programs in 53206, would also be eliminated under the Chairman's austerity budget.

That's in addition to layoffs in the following departments:

- Medical Examiner: Staff previously added to fight the opioid epidemic, putting the office at risk of losing its accreditation and putting the public at risk as homicide and drug overdose investigations take longer to be closed.
- County Parks: Parks workers, which means parks will fall further behind on deferred maintenance, cleanliness, and accessibility.
- Office on African American Affairs and Community Business Development Partners: staff that works every day to eliminate increase equity in minority contracting and other areas with a high level of racial disparities.

In response to the Chairman's formal request for austerity measures the Board will consider, County leaders compiled a list of all non-statutory, non-contract services funded by County tax dollars. Supervisors will have to choose which cuts and austerity measures they will implement to cover a \$20 million — or larger — hole. Alternatively, supervisors may consider a combination of raiding the County's fiscal reserves, increasing borrowing, and delaying debt service and pension payments — all tactics that the Chairman has condoned in the past. However, any solution that does not include additional revenue will lead to deeper cuts in the future.

The county executive has stated this since last year's budget and independent analysis from the Public Policy Forum and Milwaukee County Comptroller has confirmed the need for additional revenue to maintain service levels. Specifically, with no other options available, new vehicle registration fee revenue is needed. If the Board does not consider some kind of increase in the vehicle registration fee there will be cuts to services.

"Over the past six years the County has identified hundreds of millions of dollars in savings through efforts like reducing our energy consumption, right-sizing the County's footprint, finding operational efficiencies and eliminating redundancies, and engaging in innovative public-private partnerships like our successful beer gardens," said County Executive Chris Abele.

"But the low-hanging fruit is gone and the easy decisions have been made. Cutting any further starts slashing into programs and services, which is why I made the decision to seek revenue enhancements. I also believe that it is completely

reprehensible to mortgage the County's future by kicking the burden down the road for our children and grandchildren to deal with. My fear is that any combinations of the Chairman's proposed austerity measures and potential accounting gimmicks will have a devastating ripple effect on the County for years to come. I cannot support an austerity budget that clearly does not value Milwaukee County's residents, our public infrastructure, priceless cultural assets like the Zoo and our County Parks, or our future."

County leaders that compiled the list of austerity measures at the chairman's request were unanimously opposed to the cuts, stating in a memo to Chairman Lipscomb, "Leaders in every County department worked with the county executive and budget staff for months to come up with a responsible budget proposal that reflects our community's values. That budget has been presented as the 2018 Executive Budget. The county executive put together this budget after looking at many options - and decided that he will not make cuts to services that benefit the most vulnerable in the community. While nobody wants to pay higher fees for services, and we would all agree that we'd prefer if such services were free, we must not accomplish this by balancing the budget on the back of the County's most vulnerable. We do not and will not support any of the austerity measures that were provided in response to Chairman Lipscomb's request."