

Milwaukee County Exec. Abele: How would you balance it? County seeks to preserve service priorities, asks public for input

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MEDIA CONTACT: Karina Henderson
414.278.4216 (office) | karina.henderson@milwaukeecountywi.gov

Online tool at ABetter414.com enables residents to dive into the County's budget and share their priorities in closing the 2019 budget gap

MILWAUKEE, Monday, July 16, 2018 – Milwaukee County is again asking everyone in the county to use an online tool to see how they'd balance the budget and share their priorities, County Executive Chris Abele announced today.

Using the web-based tool at ABetter414.com, anyone who lives or works in Milwaukee County or uses County services can give their input on how to fill the budget shortfall, whether by increasing revenue, cutting certain services or a combination. The budget model will have to balance – just as it does for the County.

“Every year, we have to make the checkbook balance – just like with your household budget,” he added. “We’ve faced budget gaps in the past. Each year I’ve been in office, our budget process has started with at least a \$20 million shortfall. We’ve balanced the budget by finding efficiencies wherever possible, as well as by making some hard decisions.”

Milwaukee County Sup. Jim “Luigi” Schmitt said, “As Chairman of the Finance Committee, I know we’re at the point where those hard decisions are going to start

fundamentally affecting how well we can deliver services. Our core priorities are always sustainability, equity and excellence in County government. We want everyone in Milwaukee County to see how this budget gap affects those goals – and the services that they use.”

Under Abele’s leadership, the County has implemented a broad range of reforms and made tough choices in order to maintain a high level of service and to preserve core functions and other programs. But as has been the case since Abele took office, as costs increase and revenue remains essentially flat, the County enters the 2019 budget with a substantial gap: a projected \$23.5 million difference between revenues and expenses.

County budget staff have distilled the County’s billion-dollar budget into a few fundamental options that reflect the limited choices that the County Executive and Board of Supervisors have in closing the 2019 budget shortfall.

“We’ve worked to make a tool that reflects how our budget works, but is simple enough for folks to share input without a huge time investment,” said Abele. “We hope you’ll invest about 14 minutes to help us build a better 414 – one that reflects your priorities.”

Through mid-August, the Balancing Act tool will be available at ABetter414.com. Most options are built within the limits of federal, state and county statutes for raising revenue and scaling back services, as well as reflecting the needs of County departments to perform their assigned functions. Two options for raising revenue – increasing sales and property taxes – would require changes at the State level.

Nearly two-thirds of what the County spends comes from certain fees and from other levels of government, including state and federal dollars. Just about all of that money is restricted to funding particular programs the County is tasked with carrying out, such as Medicaid-funded behavioral-health services. On the spending side, more than half the County’s budget goes toward health and human services and transportation.

Because of past cost-saving measures – including reducing the County’s real estate footprint by 1.6 million square feet of space, making reforms to the pension system and adding a Vehicle Registration Fee – Milwaukee County has prevented the budget gap from turning into an abyss. These decisions have prevented the gap from being more than \$300 million this year.

The online budget tool clearly shows that options for raising additional revenue are extremely limited. The State of Wisconsin and the federal government have set their contributions for programs. Property taxes can only be raised to reflect net new construction in the county without referendum, and that increase is already reflected in the \$23.5 million gap. Sales taxes are currently at the upper limit set by state law; an increase would require new state legislation. While the Vehicle Registration Fee could be increased, the move has previously met public resistance, and funds from that are limited to transportation expenses. This leaves the County few other options to raise revenue.

Through the budget tool at ABetter414.com, users can comment on different sections of the budget, from property taxes to Parks, to leave more detailed feedback for County staff. Last year, nearly 300 balanced budgets were submitted to the County; this year, the tool has been streamlined to make the budget-balancing process easier to understand and complete.

“The voice of the people is the ultimate voice of authority in our country,” said Abele. “Elections only come every couple of years. Tools like Balancing Act help us hear the people’s voice even when there isn’t an election, and it takes less time than voting. I hope everyone in Milwaukee County will take a look.”