

Milwaukee County Executive Abele: Proposes elimination of “Pay to Park” program

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MILWAUKEE – Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele is proposing to cancel the Pay to Park program included in the approved 2018 Budget. Instead he is asking the County Board to fill the \$1.6 million shortfall in the Parks Department budget via a one-time draw from the County’s contingency “rainy day” fund.

“We asked for public input in order to better understand how people feel about this new dedicated revenue stream to support the parks system. I said from the beginning that charging for parking in the parks is not something that I would ever want to do, but we felt it was preferable to yet more cuts to our already strained Parks system,” said Abele. “Given the outpouring of feedback we’ve received, I am pleased that we will be able to avoid charging visitors from paying to park their vehicles this year. But we should be very clear that this is a short-term solution to a long-term problem.”

The Pay to Park Plan – approved 15-3 by the County Board – was proposed in order to prevent drastic service cuts or fee increases elsewhere in the Parks system. After receiving much thoughtful input from the community, including from the public comment session held last week at the Mitchell Park Domes, County Executive Abele focused on finding alternative solutions. He directed his budget team to explore ways to avoid Pay to Park, and they identified three possible approaches:

1. Cut \$1.6 million in expenses elsewhere in the Parks budget. Taking this approach would have meant closing the Domes, Boerner Botanical Gardens, Wehr Nature Center, and Community Centers.
2. Increase the Vehicle Registration Fee by approximately \$5 per year.
3. Draw money from the contingency fund. The contingency fund is the County's only "rainy day" fund and is meant to be used only for emergency purposes.

"Our parks make Milwaukee County a truly remarkable community, and it's essential that we all work together to ensure they are protected for our children and generations to come. If confirmed, I plan to work closely with the County Board to find solutions to this intractable problem," said Jim Sullivan, interim Parks Director.

In the absence of any great solutions, County Executive Abele is asking the Board for this temporary "fix" which will give the County a chance to plan for alternatives in next year's budget.

Background:

The pay to park proposal came as a result of increasing costs and decreasing revenues. While County government continues to get leaner and more efficient, it nonetheless has to contend with a state government that has reduced its contributions to the County budget. In 2007, Milwaukee County received about \$341 million from the state. In 2015 that number shrunk to about \$171 million. Meanwhile, Milwaukee County's momentum as the economic engine of Wisconsin continues. From 2007 to 2015, Milwaukee County increased the amount of funding it sent to the state by a quarter billion dollars. Milwaukee County is producing more for Wisconsin, yet receiving less. As a result, Milwaukee County has to plug significant budget deficits every year.