

# Mayor Barrett: A letter to Gov. Evers, Sen. Fitzgerald and Rep. Vos

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Dear Governor Evers, Senator Scott Fitzgerald and Representative Robin Vos:

As we all navigate the unprecedented health and economic challenges that covid-19 has brought to residents throughout the State of Wisconsin, I want to thank each of you for the leadership you have shown. We have already witnessed the disruption and hardships this disease has caused in addition to the health ramifications that are continuing to unfold. We must continue to work together as leaders and Americans to do all we can to protect the health and well-being of all residents in our great state.

It is in that spirit that I write to you about the spring election scheduled for April 7.

In conversations with each of you individually, I have supported your shared desire to hold our spring primary as scheduled. Having monitored the situation we are experiencing in Milwaukee, I now believe that neither in-person absentee voting nor in-person voting on April 7 is feasible or safe for our workers or residents. Consequently, I am asking you to modify the election procedure and to conduct it through mail ballots.

Late yesterday afternoon, I learned that the Elections Commission for the City of Milwaukee could no longer maintain sufficient staffing levels to operate our three in-person absentee or "early" voting locations. This occurred because the Election Commission was losing staff daily, including site supervisors.

The staffing situation has become even more challenging as a result of both the local and state "stay at home" orders. In fact, late this afternoon, Neil Albrecht, Executive Director of the Commission, informed me that since the Governor's

announcement this morning, “we are losing the commitment of dozens of election workers by the hour,” including chief inspectors who run the sites.

As we see more personnel, including longtime dependable workers, choose to stay away from polling sites where many people normally congregate, we need to focus our energy on retaining and attracting people to handle absentee ballots.

Voting sites have also become a challenge. The Commission has already been forced to relocate fifteen voting sites and needs to address ten more sites. It then must secure the sanitation and disinfecting supplies needed to operate these sites. Given reported shortages across the state, these supplies could and should be more effectively allocated.

At such a perilous time, it is imperative that we conduct this election so that every eligible person has the opportunity to secure their ballot, vote, and return it. We all understand that our democracy works best when citizens have an opportunity to vote. Under the present circumstances, in-person voting, particularly with lines of people, is simply not safe, feasible, or responsible.

This is very real. In good conscience I would not ask one of my loved ones to sit in a room for hours greeting dozens of people during this pandemic. I can't expect citizens of my city to do that either.

I recognize that a ballot by mail election presents its own challenges. It will take more time and could not be completed realistically by April 7.

In addition, uploading an ID is confusing and cumbersome to voters and many do not have the cell phone or internet access to facilitate the process properly. For some individuals, it would present a significant barrier to voting. Consequently, photo ID requirements should be waived for registered voters.

Accommodations also need to be made for the witness requirement as a result of the limits on social mobility and interaction.

Finally, current state law does not permit us to count absentee ballots until election day. We could see as many as 130,000 absentee ballots cast in Milwaukee, compared to 62,000 in the 2016 Presidential Election. We need a significantly longer processing period that begins prior to any election date.

Timing is of the essence. Every day spent preparing for in-person voting is a lost

opportunity for municipalities to retool their election systems and regain traction with meeting the already heavy demands for absentee ballots.

In closing, I do not make this request lightly. Like all of you I have hoped that this step would not be necessary. Unfortunately, it is.