

Madison Mayor Rhodes-Conway: Tough choices on the budget

Posted on Wednesday, Oct 14, 2020

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

As the public reviews the budget I released last week, you may have some questions about the hard choices I made, and why we spend what we do on the many services we deliver to the community.

The City's job is to create safe, strong, healthy neighborhoods with an emphasis on infrastructure spending. This means spending hundreds of millions of dollars every year on the pipes that deliver your drinking water and takes away your sewage and stormwater, on building and maintaining our transportation infrastructure, on hauling away trash and recycling, plowing snow and picking up leaves, on keeping our parks and libraries in good shape, and public safety which includes public health, police and fire protection.

No other level of government provides all of these core services; they are largely City responsibilities. In comparison, the County spends hundreds of millions on social services, and the City provides a comparatively small supplement to that. Despite City government's small comparative share of the spending, I made sure we did not cut social and community services spending this year, even in the face of a \$20 million budget shortfall.

Madison is growing rapidly. With this growth, the demand for City services only increases. In this context, it was a priority for me not to cut City staff – which we were mostly able to do. Staff have been working day in and day out to deliver quality services directly to the public, even in the face of a deadly pandemic. In addition to staff salaries, the City pays for health insurance, vacation, and other benefits, and sometimes for overtime. These costs go up every year, so every year our budget for personnel increases. Seventy-eight percent of the 2021 operating

budget is dedicated to funding these positions and paying the City's debt service. While it seems easy to call for cuts of 5, 10 or 20 percent, there is no fluff in City agencies. Large cuts mean cutting the jobs of real people, usually those most recently hired.

This year my budget cut almost \$2 million from the police department's General Fund, the largest expenditure cut to the police budget in the last 10 years or more. MPD receives funds from multiple sources including various grants, parking revenues, and the City's General Fund. When building the budget I have the most discretion over how the City's General Fund is allocated. My cuts included moving staff out of MPD and into other departments, and requiring further spending cuts.

But the budget for police continues to grow due to rising health care and pension costs and the fact that the previous administration negotiated and signed a multiyear contract which includes a 3.75 percent raise in 2021. This raise is no longer affordable. Since May of this year, I have been asking the police union to reopen their contract, but they have declined so far. Regardless of the union's response, these cuts will be made to the department's budget.

While I did make cuts to the police budget, the cuts are more modest than some in the community have asked for. I made these decisions for several reasons: (1) the police have an important job to do in fighting dangerous and violent crime and we are currently seeing skyrocketing gun violence in our community; (2) we are facing an expansion in population and geography to serve as we annex the Town of Madison into the City of Madison in 2022, and (3) because I am striving to not put people out of work in a tough economy if I can help it. The Finance Department tells us that a 5 percent reduction in the police budget represents 52 positions, a 10 percent reduction represents 104 positions.

Nonetheless, we are striving for continuous improvement and community involvement in policing, and continuing to find other ways to respond to public safety issues that don't involve the police. These include:

□ A significant new injection of funds into a new Violence Prevention Unit in Public Health Madison Dane County.

□ A big investment in alternative Crisis Response Teams, including a community paramedic and a trained crisis worker, outside of MPD, so that armed officers are not the first responders to every behavioral health call.

This work of reimagining public safety will continue, and I expect that we will find more ways to shift responsibility from the police department to other types of response. The budget now goes to the Common Council to review, amend, and finally adopt. There will be many opportunities for public involvement along the way.