Johnson says he'll continue to advocate for Milwaukee at state Capitol when he takes helm as mayor

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Milwaukee Common Council President Cavalier Johnson said he's going to have a "cot in the Capitol" as he continues to advocate for Milwaukee's needs and strengthen partnerships with the state once he becomes mayor.

Johnson, who was first elected to the Milwaukee Common Council in 2016 and re-elected in 2020, is slated to take over as acting mayor upon Tom Barrett's confirmation as ambassador to Luxembourg. He plans to run for mayor when a special election is held.

"We simply cannot get the things done that we need for Milwaukee without getting the Legislature to come on board. We just can't," Johnson said, citing issues such as the city's looming pension crisis at a WisPolitics.com/Milwaukee Press Club luncheon in Milwaukee. "And so I'm going to be a tireless advocate for Milwaukee, I'm not just gonna be a new face for Milwaukee, I'm gonna be a tireless advocate for it.

"Legislators can expect that when I'm mayor, I'll have what is basically I'm calling a cot in the Capitol, and I'll be stressing the importance of the crucial need to have a strong partnership between the city of Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin."

He said while the relationship with lawmakers is poor for now, he's already been reaching out to forge connections with GOP lawmakers.

"Over the course of the past year, as council president, I've already been doing outreach to members of the Legislature, especially on the Republican side, because they're the ones that have the power," he said.

Johnson said it was heartening when some of those lawmakers reached out to him upon news he will become acting mayor. He said they "want to work with a new generation of leadership,"

"So I'm very confident, I'm very hopeful as well, that we'll be able to solve some of the things that have not been able to be addressed in the current city administration for some time, with ... new leadership in the mayor's office," he said.

The city is slated to receive about $394 million in federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act.

He said his priorities for the use of ARPA funds would be to create more access to affordable housing, increase lead abatement efforts in homes and free up tax levy dollars to address the looming pension crisis.

But he stressed the need to be responsible in the use of those funds.

"We're going to be under a microscope with having all of these dollars coming in, so the state that has all the keys to be able to help us, they're going to be watching how we spend it," he said. "And so I think having some fiscal prudence is going to show the state that we are interested in solving our issues and will do what we can by ourselves, but at the end of the day, this money's not going to last forever and we need the state to be our partner on that."

Johnson repeatedly said stable housing and access to good-paying jobs are needed to improve the quality of life for Milwaukee residents and combat crime and violence.

"If we want our neighborhoods to be cohesive and not porous, for our residents to be stable and not transient, we need to have access to better jobs with better wages," he said.

He called for a move away from a past focus on trying to bring in large manufacturers to provide jobs.

"It can't just be the old thought about large-scale heavy industrial manufacturing jobs, there needs to be a new approach to jobs, right?" he said. "It's got to be manufacturing where we can get it, certainly, but it's got to be green jobs, it's got to be tech jobs. It's got to be, you know, these collaborative business opportunities, it's got to be luring supply chains here, it's got to be working to make sure that we attract remote workers, building up opportunities for people in our community to earn a sustainable living."

Watch the video at the WisPolitics.com YouTube channel:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0FO8o8WdB99-9uZXQWqP6w