

Milwaukee County Exec. Crowley: 2022 recommended budget address

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MILWAUKEE - The following are the remarks of Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley's budget address as written to be delivered during the Budget Address to the Milwaukee County Board this morning:

Thank you, Chairwoman Marcelia Nicholson, Clerk George Christianson, Comptroller Scott Manske, and the entire County Board. It is a pleasure to present the 2021 recommended budget to you all this afternoon.

Before we begin today's discussion on the 2022 Recommended Budget, I'd like to take time to respectfully acknowledge where I reside here at the Milwaukee County Courthouse: on traditional Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee homeland right on the southwest shore of Michigami.

For more than five hundred years, Native communities have demonstrated incredible resilience in the face of violent attempts to separate them from their land, culture, and history. We acknowledge that we stand on land taken from its rightful stewards as a small, but necessary gesture towards honoring our Native brothers and sisters.

Generations of our Native residents have been left out of the picture when we think of Milwaukee County. The 2022 Recommended Budget continues to implement our shared vision for Milwaukee County, and I believe it takes us a step further to help repair the relationship with our Native residents, and the many communities that have been left behind or excluded by government policy throughout history, in order to tell the true story of our community and set future generations up for success.

Today, it is an honor to present the 2022 Recommended Budget to you all. A budget is a reflection of values and I'm proud to say that in the face of many challenges this budget remains a reflection of our shared values. Despite the challenges that persist, this budget advances a vision to achieve racial equity and become the healthiest county in Wisconsin.

Our commitment to racial equity is significant as the County continues to face an ongoing crisis on two fronts: systemic racism and COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the inequities in our system and the difficulties with addressing the harm they pose to county residents. The pandemic has only exacerbated the disparities many of us know all too well.

This budget tackles both pandemics with targeted investments in our vision to address the root causes of the inequities that have been magnified by the pandemic. The budget includes targeted investments in our vision and strategic focus areas prioritizing funds to expand housing and mental health resources, advance public health and safety, and address race and gender inequities in employee compensation.

The 2022 Recommended Budget closes a budget gap of \$20 million with no major cuts to services our community depends on. The gap was closed by prioritizing fiscally responsible decisions, leveraging one-time pandemic relief funding, and asking departments to absorb the growing costs to continue delivering essential services. However, budget gaps will continue to persist because of a growing structural deficit—a perfect storm of state-mandated services and obligations we are still paying off today thanks to irresponsible decisions made by County leaders decades ago.

Right now, over 70 percent of our local tax dollars support state mandated services, and our options for increasing revenue are extremely limited and undesirable. These state mandates are growing twice as fast as our ability to pay for them. Without change, by 2027, state mandates are projected to consume all of our local tax dollars, leaving no funding for local priorities.

The federal dollars Milwaukee County has received to combat the pandemic, meet essential worker needs, or reclaim lost revenue are helpful to immediately respond

to the public health emergency, but will not fix the County's long-term financial problems. Although Milwaukee County received \$183 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds, pandemic-related revenue loss is projected at approximately \$300 to \$400 million, far outpacing the federal funds available.

In the face of these challenges, Milwaukee County remains in a position to allocate the resources it does have to advance its strategic vision in 2022.

The 2022 Recommended Budget prioritizes moving resources upstream to bridge the gap in health disparities that currently make Milwaukee one of the least healthy counties in Wisconsin.

To advance this strategic focus area of the County's strategic plan, Milwaukee County is designing an organization that puts our constituents first so that anyone can access County services in a way that meets their needs. A part of this strategy is to break down silos across County government and advance the "No Wrong Door" model of care. This model maximizes the access to, and the quality of, services offered to residents.

To do so, our organization must be designed so that our vision and strategy can drive our operations. The Recommended Budget creates a new, cabinet-level department named Strategy, Budget & Performance to clearly connect strategy and budget functions. The new department's Strategy Director will oversee cross-functional teams to work on organization and community-wide strategies to advance the vision. Teams will also develop a Strategy Dashboard for tracking the County's progress on advancing key performance indicators at the organizational level, as well as advancing indicators like housing, employment, and life expectancy at the community level.

The organizational re-design also modernizes the Office of the County Executive by building a properly resourced external communications function, and adding a Director of Legislative Affairs position to advance these policies at various levels of government.

Additionally, the Office on African American Affairs has been reimagined into an Office of Equity. The redesign provides a broader infrastructure for Milwaukee County to collaborate with and build the capacity of County leaders, departments, and stakeholders needed to transform policies, procedures, practices, and power structures to become a place where all citizens are healthy and thriving.

The office will continue to provide advice, guidance, research, and technical assistance to improve racial equity, leading efforts to ensure shared equity language and concepts are used across the County. This change broadens the scope of the office in order to support County leaders and departments, increase accountability for achieving racial equity, and broaden reach to communities impacted by health and racial inequities, including other communities of color, LGBTQ+ and people with varying abilities.

Office staff will continue to work closely with African American leaders and community organizations to ensure targeted outreach, resource connection, and service delivery to African American residents and communities.

Additionally, the 2022 Recommended Budget creates a new Children, Youth, and Family Services Division which includes the former Division of Youth and Family Services as well as children's programs within the former Disabilities Services Division.

Aligning these services for young people and their families reflects a shift away from outdated and ineffective corrections-based policies to preventative, rehabilitative, and community-based investments. Aligned with this strategy is the expansion of Credible Messengers, which provides critical support to youth transitioning from Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake Schools to maximize opportunities for success and integration into the community. The 2022 Recommended Budget expands this investment with an appropriation of \$1,250,000 for advocacy, mentoring, emotional first aid, community engagement and violence mediation for youth justice system-involved youth.

When it comes to services for older adults, the budget expands the Dine Out Pilot

Program to reach more seniors who live in underserved neighborhoods. The program is estimated to serve an additional 7,000 meals and offer cultural food items as well as cater to a broader range of dietary preferences.

The Recommended Budget adds two new positions to the Office of Emergency Management to track and analyze health data with a racial equity lens. Their work provides information that will help break down silos and identify needs among various populations and assist the County in developing a targeted strategy to address disparities.

The focus on data, transparency, and accountability builds upon the County's nationally recognized COVID-19 dashboard and the Milwaukee County Open Data portal. The portal was released in 2021 to provide transparent access to County datasets. Initial data sets included budget data, employment statistics by race, gender and age, information on behavioral health services and data from the Medical Examiner's Office. More data sets will become available in 2022.

The House of Correction and Department of Health and Human Services are partnering to provide housing navigation services for residents ahead of their transition back into the community. The budget creates a Community Intervention Specialist position to specifically support residents in securing housing and improving their chances of not recidivating once re-entering society. The budget also funds a Human Services Worker position to help improve literacy, math, and life skills to help residents be successful once they are no longer in our care.

The budget allocates \$225,000 in the upcoming year for the Behavioral Health Division to continue the Crisis Assessment Response Team expansion in collaboration with the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Office and the Milwaukee County Office of Emergency Management for dispatching mental health resources.

Additionally, several departments collaborated to develop a Food Service Master Plan to improve the quality and service delivery of food for residents in our care. The budget creates a Manager of Contracts position in 2022 to provide better coordination of food contracts between the House of Correction, Criminal Justice Facility, and Vel R. Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center. The budget also includes funds for food service equipment repair and maintenance. This is the first step in larger effort to implement significant kitchen renovations, improved food

quality, and future job training programs for residents.

Milwaukee County is intentionally working to diversify our workforce at all levels of our organization so that County government reflects the full diversity of the community we serve. Creating intentional inclusion also means building an inclusive workplace where the culture, values, and opinions of various groups are represented in the decision-making process.

The 2022 Recommended Budget builds on previous efforts to increase representation, include more perspectives at the decision-making table, and equitably compensate individuals. Milwaukee County cannot deliver the essential services our community depends on without our employees, and it is up to County leadership to ensure our workforce is engaged, supported, and adequately compensated for the work they do to advance our shared racial health equity goals.

This budget includes the largest investment in employee compensation in over five years, with a proposed 2 percent across-the-board pay increase for County employees as of April 2022. In addition, an annualized investment of \$5 million is included to address disparities in pay by race and gender. The greatest disparities within departments will be identified as the Department of Human Resources continues its County-wide compensation study, with recommendations expected in July 2022.

Milwaukee County is also committed to keeping healthcare affordable for employees and their families. Healthcare premiums will not change in 2022. The County's premiums are below market rate for both government and private sector, and the County has not raised healthcare premiums for the past three years.

The budget makes small changes to employees' dental plan, with an increased deductible to \$50 from \$25 per person, decreased basic co-insurance from 100 percent to 80 percent, and decreased major co-insurance from 80 percent to 60 percent. Pension contributions for general employees will go down in the coming year, from 6.2 percent in 2021 to 6.1 percent in 2022. Contributions for public safety employees are slated to increase slightly, from 9.7 percent in 2021 to 9.9 percent in

2022. Public safety rates are subject to collective bargaining and historically the bargaining process has lead to the same rates as calculated by actuaries.

Once again, departments used a Racial Equity Budget Tool when constructing their budgets. This analysis is made available to the public and helps County leaders determine the impact of budget decisions along racial lines. This year, departments were asked what would they do if they had additional funds to specifically address racial equity. The most common response was making investments in attracting, supporting, and retaining a diverse workforce. As a result, the 2022 budget includes three new positions in the Department of Human Resources to support such efforts across the entire organization.

A Training and Development Specialist position will be created in Human Resources to coordinate racial equity training as part of the countywide learning and development function. A new Data Analytics Coordinator will establish and maintain workforce data, evaluate racial equity training effectiveness, and drive toward key performance indicators of equity.

Additionally, a new Diversity Recruiter position is created to exclusively focus on seeking out candidates from underrepresented backgrounds. This position will build relationships with outside organizations to develop diverse talent pipelines and conduct sourcing, and partner with departments to create and execute strategic recruitment plans. An additional allocation of \$60,000 is included in 2022 to provide more resources for advertising positions to communities across the County.

Milwaukee County is always working to improve our efforts to build a more diverse and inclusive workplace. Several departments are also increasing recruitment and outreach to a broad variety of community affinity groups, trade and neighborhood associations, minority chambers, schools, and other partners.

The 2022 budget includes three additional Park Maintenance Workers to leverage

the successful Fresh Coast Fresh Start and Fresh Coast Ambassador programs, which connect underrepresented individuals to careers in green infrastructure maintenance. The budget also funds the Zoo's creation of a new Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility position to advance the County's vision and ensure alignment with Association of Zoos & Aquariums standards.

Additionally, the Department of Human Resources will continue to establish criteria to ensure interview panels across the County are balanced by gender and race.

The 2022 budget continues reimagining how Milwaukee County invests its resources to address the root causes of problems and eliminate barriers so residents can live successful, healthy, full lives.

2021 was the inaugural year of the Grants and Special Projects Division, established with the goal of enhancing Milwaukee County's ability to compete in grant contests and implement projects. The Division also serves as a mechanism for financial sustainability to maximize resources and break down barriers in addressing departmental resource needs to advance health and racial equity.

As of September 2021, staff have supported 32 different grant opportunities in collaboration with 22 unduplicated County leaders from across administrative and elected offices. These proposals represent \$30,943,834 in requests, of which 11 projects were awarded for \$17,994,581, with 20 projects pending notice of award.

The Grants unit will be focused on operationalizing grant development and planning strategies in 2022. This includes working closely with departments to define the department's strategic priorities, identify resource gaps, and target revenue opportunities that can further those initiatives. In 2022, the division aims to secure at least \$15 million in competitive grant revenue to advance Milwaukee County's vision.

The levy for Emergency Medical Services (EMS) municipal subsidy will be reset to 2012 levels, increasing the amount subsidizing municipal emergency medical services to \$9 million in 2022. The Office of Emergency Management will distribute this funding countywide to support City and Village EMS services using an equitable formula based on municipal population, geographic square miles, paramedic call

volume, and necessary improvements to the EMS system. This contribution sustains OEM's strong relationships with local fire departments and aims to improve service delivery by focusing on health equity.

Community-based health services continue to be a top priority and the 2022 Recommended Budget continues to fund important services related to community health. The Mental Health Emergency Center is an example of successful public-private partnerships. The facility represents a significant milestone in the work to improve mental health services and improve the quality of life for Milwaukee County residents. Often, one of the largest barriers to receiving support is knowing where to go for help, which is why providing a center that offers easily accessible, mental-health-specific services right in our community is so important. The new facility is in close proximity to where more than 70 percent of the patients currently served by the Behavioral Health Division live, improving access to care for many county residents.

Psychiatric Emergency Services will shift to the new Mental Health Emergency Center in Spring of 2022. Inpatient services will transition to the new Granite Hills hospital operated by Universal Health Services in West Allis beginning this year with full transition anticipated by mid-2022.

In 2021, the Milwaukee County Housing Division helped approximately 8,500 households facing housing insecurity due to the negative economic impacts of the pandemic. The 2022 budget continues to support the immediate economic stabilization for households to address the systemic economic challenges that have contributed to the inequal impact of the pandemic.

Right to Counsel Milwaukee, a program which provides a right to free legal representation in evictions for eligible households beginning in September of 2021, has been funded to the tune of \$2.7 million.

Milwaukee County Small Claims Court data indicates families at-risk for evictions are mostly Black and Latino residents in low-income areas. The 10 neighborhoods with the highest eviction rates are 73% African American with a 40% poverty rate. Right to Counsel Milwaukee will prioritize services to these county residents given

the present disparities.

Recognizing transit as an essential service thousands of residents use each day, and a key element of our economic recovery, the 2022 Recommended Budget preserves transit and paratransit services. This is possible largely due to the availability of federal funds designated for the response to, and recovery from the pandemic.

After the pandemic was declared, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) of 2020, resulting in \$54.9 million being distributed to the Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS). In early 2021, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act provided an additional \$52.9 million, followed by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021, which provided another \$83.6 million for a total of over \$191 million for MCTS. In response to the availability of these one-time Federal funds, the State Legislature voted to cut State support for MCTS by \$32.7 million. The Governor of Wisconsin directed \$19.7 million of the State's ARPA dollars as an investment in transit to offset most of this \$32.7 million cut. The majority of Federal funds supporting transit will be committed and allocated by the end of 2022, showing the dire need for sustainable transit funding for the long term.

More than \$15 million is invested in replacing the existing North Shop Highway Maintenance Facility. Originally built in 1928 without a women's restroom, this north side building will be reconstructed to include heated vehicle parking for trucks and other vehicles, administrative offices, locker rooms, a repair garage, and a truck wash facility.

On the capital side, more than 100 MCTS buses are nearing 500,000 miles or 12 years on the road – the end of their useful life by Federal Transit Administration standards. The 2022 budget funds the purchase of 60 additional clean diesel buses to allow for maintaining continuity of service, good repair standards, and lowering future repair costs.

The 2022 Recommended budget continues investments in the creation of the East-West Bus Rapid Transit line (BRT) and the delivery of 11 battery electric buses for the route. BRT will provide a more efficient, higher frequency services for residents

with a disability, people without vehicles, families sharing a single vehicle, people without licenses, or a host of others who traditionally rely on public transit to navigate the county. This historic project strengthens our entire transit network and makes it a breeze for residents to travel throughout the area. This important service advances our racial equity goals and moves us closer to fulfilling our vision.

The budget recognizes that healthy residents are safe residents and makes significant investments upstream to address the holistic health of all residents. It is also important to acknowledge the reality that change takes time and while we work to implement equitable solutions upstream, some residents will continue to run into direct threats to their health and safety downstream. This budget acknowledges those downstream needs with investments in public safety and justice.

\$300,000 is allocated to expand the use of body cameras in the Office of the Milwaukee County Sheriff. Phone call costs in the House of Corrections and Milwaukee County Jail are reduced by 25 percent, resulting in an estimated cumulative reduction of \$700,000 in revenue but helping to ensure residents can communicate with their support networks on the outside. In addition, four full time positions are created to handle the backlog in the Milwaukee County Circuit Court System resulting from pandemic closures.

The 2022 budget includes a \$3.00 per hour premium pay increase for Correction Officer staff in the House of Correction, Sheriff's Office, and Vel R. Phillips Youth and Family Justice Center. This item will be revisited in the future for 2023 and beyond.

The premium pay increase aims to address pay competitiveness regionally and retention within Correction Officer positions to ensure adequate staffing levels to maintain the highest quality of service for those in our care. Correction Officers' duties are not the same as law enforcement, their primary duty is to ensure the health and safety of people who enter our care.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as pay raises in surrounding counties, Criminal Justice Facility and House of Corrections staff levels have decreased. In order to make sure that our staff has the capacity to adequately care for those housed in Milwaukee County facilities, including preventing the spread of COVID-19

in shared or congregate housing, it is imperative that officer pay remain competitive enough to attract and retain Correction Officers.

The 2022 Recommended Budget includes salary adjustments to address pay equity issues for over 50 percent of the Human Service Workers within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). These staff perform critical, frontline services for our most vulnerable citizens throughout Milwaukee County and comprise the largest segment of the DHHS workforce. They support Adult Services including the Aging and Disability Resource Center as well as Children, Youth and Family Services (CYFS). An appropriation of \$350,000 is made for pay equity in the ADRC and CYFS, in addition to \$170,000 to address equity for certain supervisors and staff supporting the ADRC.

The budget also makes major investments in important infrastructure needs to promote health and safety in our parks. The Milwaukee County Parks system spans more than 15,000 acres, including 157 parks, 11 parkways, and over 210 miles of trails. Approximately 27 percent of 2022 capital budget bonding investments are made in our parks system, including enhancements at the King Park Skate Shelter, improvements to the Root River and Oak Creek Parkways, and the second phase of repairs at the McKinley Parking Lot.

With support from the Weigel-Hearst Trust Fund, the budget includes a \$100,000 investment in tree plantings. With the onset of Emerald Ash Borer disease, Parks has unfortunately had to remove thousands of ash trees over the past several years. This investment will help redevelop the County's tree canopy, with a special focus on reforestation in urban areas using a racial equity index, along with planting trees that are native to Wisconsin and resilient in the face of climate change.

In response to the drastic lifeguard shortages of the past few years, Milwaukee County has focused planning efforts in 2021-2022 on addressing one of the root causes of the labor shortage and lack of overall swim ability within our community. Funding in the amount of \$40,000 is allocated to support efforts to convene partners and address swim abilities, with the goal of reducing drownings, supporting public water safety throughout the county.

Parks has seen a dramatic increase in golf course attendance in 2020 and 2021. In efforts to secure needed revenue for our Parks system, golf cart fees will increase one dollar in 2022 at Tournament, Championship and Regulation courses. Discount card rates at Executive Courses will increase by one dollar in 2022. Golf cart fees were last increased in 2016 and discount rates at Executive courses were last increased in 2012.

COVID-19 has continued to take a significant toll on the County's park system, which has no dedicated, direct, local funding source and relies significantly on earned revenue.

In 2021, Parks engaged the Wisconsin Policy Forum to research and formulate a sustainable path forward for the department. Both an executive steering committee and advisory group including dozens of local stakeholders guide the research. Upon the expected release of the report in late 2021, Parks intends to embark on a community input process to shape the future of the Milwaukee County Park system—including securing sustainable revenue.

Once again, the budget process began with an estimated \$20 million budget gap. The gap was closed in three primary ways: departments meeting a flat tax levy, withdrawing from debt services reserve, and a realizing an unexpected increase in sales tax revenue.

Each year, the budget gap is caused largely by declining state revenue and state-imposed caps on the County's ability to raise its own revenue, coupled with increasing pension and healthcare costs and a growing need for community services - especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Issuing a flat tax levy target to departments means they had to find a way to balance their 2022 budgets using the same amount of tax levy they had to work

with in 2021. For 2022, the flat tax levy target meant that departments had to absorb approximately \$10 million of costs to continue providing services.

For the Parks Department, a flat tax levy means that any services cut or reduced in previous years remain absent. Labor expenses continue to increase and the seasonal budget for the Parks Department does not change, so the department has fewer staff and the same amount of dollars to execute the same duties they would be responsible for if fully staffed.

The information technology infrastructure needed to modernize County services also suffers with a flat tax levy. The majority of the technology investments in the 2022 Recommended Budget are to continue operating at current levels and to cover recurring costs for IT, to the tune of over \$5.8 million versus just \$265,000 for innovation spending. The result is reductions in support and investments in technology that are critical to innovation and efficiency, and departments being unable to resolve issues or to achieve service delivery goals.

For example, the Zoo cannot upgrade to a mesh wi-fi network to improve online connectivity due to the levy target. Additionally, the Department of Health and Human Services cannot complete document imaging for online databases, and the Medical Examiner cannot go paperless with toxicology reports and will not have a case management system in 2022 as anticipated.

With an eye toward fiscal sustainability over the past decade, Milwaukee has built a healthy reserve of approximately \$67 million through significant annual contributions. The 2022 budget includes a reserve withdrawal of \$7 million as an effective way to close the gap with a minimal impact to services.

The budget increases the tax levy by \$5.77 million, the maximum amount allowed by the State of Wisconsin. This amount includes \$2.9 million in net new construction and terminated Tax Incremental Districts, an Emergency Medical Services subsidy increase of \$1.5 million, \$1.0 million for debt service, and smaller changes including personal property aid adjustments.

Although there are no major cuts to public-facing services in the 2022 budget, Milwaukee County is having to do more with less year over year as the structural budget gap persists. Milwaukee County received over \$134 million in capital project requests for 2022 but could only fund about 40 percent of those requests. That leaves a gap of almost \$79 million in capital needs that will only compound in future years.

Between 2010 and 2020, Milwaukee County closed its structural gap through \$300 million in expenditure reductions. This averages roughly \$30 million per year, more than the entire tax levy funding for our parks department, district attorney's office, and emergency management services combined. Each year, departments rise to the challenge, closing these annual gaps by creating efficiencies, streamlining services, and making the county leaner. But these cuts — year, after year, after year — are unsustainable.

Even with those savings realized, the County still faces a structural deficit moving forward as state aids remain stagnant. In just a few years, Milwaukee County will not have enough money to fund essential services not mandated by the state like parks, bus routes, emergency services, arts, senior services, public safety, disability services, and youth services.

In addition, preliminary revenue loss estimates for the next three years due to the pandemic far outpace the amount of federal dollars received. Federal funding has been essential to addressing the immediate public health and economic crisis caused by the pandemic, but it cannot be relied upon to solve the County's ongoing budgetary crisis.

Despite federal pandemic relief for the short term, Milwaukee County is continuing to build on the momentum generated by the Move Forward Milwaukee coalition, a partnership between the business community, state legislators, municipal governments, and community groups that advocates for allowing Milwaukee County to pursue a binding referendum for a 1 percent local option sales tax with property tax relief. The County needs a sustainable funding solution to support critical services for the long-term.

Milwaukee County continues to advocate at the state level for a local option sales tax increase to both decrease property taxes and fund local priorities. Even with a 1 percent increase in the sales tax, Milwaukee County would maintain one of the lowest sales taxes in the nation for a community our size and generate \$160 million in additional revenue - matching the scale of the problem at the lowest cost to taxpayers with no budgetary impacts on the state budget.

At a minimum, 25 percent of the revenue generated would be set aside for property tax relief. The remaining revenue would be used to address local priorities within the County. It is estimated that one-third of the sales tax would be generated by commuters and visitors from outside Milwaukee County to support services consumed.

Milwaukee County taxpayers with a home valued at \$150,000 would receive an average 7 percent reduction in property taxes (\$734 to \$684), the largest property tax relief in recent memory. In addition, taxpayers would receive additional property tax relief on their municipal property tax, these rates would vary with each municipality.

Rebalancing the funding structure provides real benefits to the County, municipalities within Milwaukee County, and for households seeking relief from burdensome property tax rates. And, looking long term, it can ensure that in the future we aren't starting our budget process with planning for cuts, and instead planning for investments. We can put more dollars into local priorities like mental health and substance abuse care, rehabilitative services, public transit, senior services, and maintain valuable assets like the Zoo and our parks system.

If Milwaukee is provided the ability to leverage our economic growth, we can put those dollars to work, investing in regional assets and county services to improve the quality of life that attracts energized talent, new businesses, and capital investment.

To deny Milwaukee County the ability to pursue a local option sales tax would be an incredible missed opportunity for the entire state to improve one of its main

economic engines. Providing Milwaukee the ability to continue as a globally competitive metro region and the state's economic engine is critical to the economic direction of Wisconsin.

Continuing our economic growth requires us to be globally competitive with other metro regions to attract capital investment and human capital to our region. Today, the critical resource for successful communities and businesses isn't steel or paper pulp, it's high-value, energized talent. With the right tools, Milwaukee can continue being an asset for the state, by attracting investment and employees, while generating higher economic output.

Given the persistent challenges over the last year, I'm proud to recommend a budget that continues to address dual, on-going pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism by implementing a strategic plan to move resources upstream to address the root causes of racial health disparities. The budget continues investments in families, public safety, mental health, housing, and the County's workforce by addressing race and gender inequities in employee compensation.

This past year we have demonstrated through our organizational performance the ability to navigate the current public health crisis and improve the lives of County residents. The County Board has my continued commitment and support as we work together to achieve our goals.

Now the budget is in your hands, the members of the County Board. As an optimist, I like to remind others that we all have the power to create change and the members of this body have the power to come together and advance our collective vision and take the next steps forward on our journey to achieve our goals.

Together we have every reason to believe that we can mitigate the challenges of the ongoing public health crisis, continue to improve the lives of County residents, and secure our financial future so that we can invest in future generations.