

# Milwaukee-area JFC members disagree on sales tax plan, Brewers stadium funding

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The shared revenue bill's referendum requirement for Milwaukee sales tax increases remain a big sticking point for Republicans and Dems.

Rep. Evan Goyke, D-Milwaukee, and Rep. Jessie Rodriguez, R-Oak Creek, during a WisPolitics luncheon at UW-Milwaukee's Zilber School of Public Health clashed over various provisions in the Republican-proposed shared revenue bill. The measure would allow the city of Milwaukee to temporarily bump its sales tax by 2 percentage points if voters approved the increase. Milwaukee County could also bump its sales tax by 0.375 percentage points if voters approve the increase under the bill.

Goyke argued the measure isn't bipartisan yet, but Rodriguez pointed out Dem Milwaukee Mayor Cavalier Johnson and Dem Milwaukee County Exec David Crowley worked closely with Republicans to draft AB 245.

Rodriguez also argued the referendum issue shouldn't be a point of disagreement because it has been part of the conversation for at least a few years while working on the "A Fair Deal for Milwaukee County" proposal.

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"And at that time, the proposal was having a referendum in order to increase a sales tax to pay for pension obligations," she said. "This bill does that exactly."

Goyke agreed the referendum component has always been a part of the talks, "but it did not have the components that the current referendum question would have, and it did not have policy strings attached to it."

Johnson last week in an Assembly Local Government Committee hearing on the bill argued the bill should put the sales tax increase up for a Milwaukee Common Council vote instead of sending it to referendum.

Johnson also voiced concerns about a provision to remove Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission oversight over the departments and give it to the city's fire and police chiefs, along with limits on how the city can spend tax dollars on transportation.

Rodriguez, who represents a suburb in Milwaukee County, said the referendum piece isn't going away and balked at Johnson and Goyke's argument to let local governments decide the sales tax increase question.

"That's not a good way to govern," she charged. "If you're going to ask taxpayers to pay more money, then get them to come on board. And that's how we can do that."

She added constituents she's talked to want guardrails in place to make sure the extra revenue from a sales tax hike funds areas Milwaukee struggles with, "making sure that it is going to be used primarily to pay off the pension obligation."

Many government leaders have warned Milwaukee faces a "fiscal cliff" as its pension obligations grow and Milwaukee looks to cut services in order to pay its retirees.

"The other area that a lot of people in my community are interested in is the fact that there is a huge increase in crime," Rodriguez added. "And we've seen a decrease in police and also have seen that a lot of fire stations are closing down."

The shared revenue bill includes maintenance of effort requirements for police.

To meet that requirement, municipalities could meet any two of four options compared to the previous year:

- \*expenditures, not including capital costs, for law enforcement;
- \*the number of full-time equivalent officers employed by or assigned to the municipality;
- \*the number of citations for moving traffic violations issued;
- \*the number of arrests and citations for other violations.

Despite all the issues, Goyke said he would vote for it.

"I'll vote for it," he said. "Representative Rodriguez, would you vote yes? Are you

endorsing the vote yes campaign and the countywide referendum? Because we're going to need your help."

Rodriguez said she's already started talking to constituents about the referendum.

"I think if we're going to ask people to pay more taxes for a problem that needs to be addressed, then we need to go out there and make the case to the public," she added.

The two also clashed over how to fund the Milwaukee Brewers' stadium maintenance efforts.

Goyke argued Republicans and the rest of the state should get on board with Gov. Tony Evers' plan to spend \$290 million of the state's projected \$7 billion surplus on stadium maintenance because the Brewers bring tens of millions in tax revenue to the state.

"They're reaping that into all the income tax and the sales tax minus 0.5 from Milwaukee County," he said. "So the state is already benefiting and has this ongoing benefit. I think it's fair to ask the state to carry the mantle."

He also said Evers' plan would create an endowment that would yield returns from now until stadium maintenance is needed. A plan that would only fund maintenance once a year would cost taxpayers more, he said.

"And if we do this, you know, annually, and have this ongoing revenue, it will ultimately have a higher price tag for taxpayers," he added.

Rodriguez said Republicans have moved away from Evers' proposal because it lacked details and there weren't enough stakeholders at the negotiating table.

Comparing the issue to the fight to fund construction of the Milwaukee Bucks' arena, Fiserv Forum, Rodriguez said there were more people at the table than on Brewers stadium funding.

"None of that has happened with this proposal," she said. "Instead, the governor put something in his budget and there weren't any details."

Republicans are focused on getting the shared revenue issue fixed before they really dig into the Brewers issue, she said. But she also said GOP members are

concerned about how long the team plans to stay in Milwaukee because they don't want to make an investment in a team that may soon leave.

“Having discussions on this, I think everyone is in agreement: we want to find a way to keep the Brewers here,” she said. “I think it's a benefit. Everyone recognizes it's a benefit for the state. It's a benefit for this region, as well.”