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ROBERT G. DONOVAN

ALDERMAN, 8TH DISTRICT

Continued state cigarette subsidy for Native American tribes disappointing

\$68.7 million subsidy ought to go to bolster public safety, Alderman Donovan says

Statement from Alderman Bob Donovan

May 24, 2017

Did you know the State of Wisconsin is subsidizing Native American tribes for cigarette sales to the tune of \$68.7 million over a two-year period?

I'd bet most people in Wisconsin are unaware of it, as I was until just recently. On top of that, they've been doing it for decades, and all at the same time that they've been spending millions trying to get people to quit smoking.

Go figure.

Have you ever wondered why most people just shake their heads when they learn about crazy decisions made by government? Well, this is one of those moments.

For the better part of two years, I have been working with state Rep. Joe Sanfelippo to fashion a way to dramatically increase state grant funds to help local communities hire foot and bicycle patrol officers (also known as beat cops), as well as specialized officers (detectives) without raising taxes. The need is there, undoubtedly, as we are facing mounting public safety challenges.

We are seeing increased calls for beat cops across Milwaukee to help restore order and stability to our neighborhoods. And with the uptick in crime related to the heroin and opioid epidemic, continued violence and a major increase in human trafficking, the need for detectives has never been higher.

The challenge, of course, with any legislation, is finding the money to pay for the resources you are looking to deploy. Rep. Sanfelippo has offered multiple options to reprioritize funding and direct it toward law enforcement. One idea from Rep. Sanfelippo is a 'no brainer' which would redirect the state's cigarette sales tax subsidy to provide funds to local communities to hire more police officers.

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The state law directing the cigarette sale subsidy for Native American tribes dates back to the 1980s – long before the casinos arrived and changed the economic landscape (for the better) for many tribes. Undoubtedly, times have changed since then, and I believe the tribes would also agree that 1982 and 2017 look nothing like one another.

It begs the question: Do we really need to have the cigarette sale subsidy in place?

We have an alarming and growing need for help with public safety issues, and I am confident most tribal leaders would agree to change the cigarette sale subsidy. In my district, the Potawatomi have always cared about the wellbeing of the community, and I have long maintained a positive and productive relationship with the tribe. This effort may indeed involve reopening negotiations with the tribes, but I believe it is well worth it given our needs and the changing times. I truly believe they would see the value in changing this subsidy.

Pure and simple, I believe it is not unreasonable for the tribes to purchase and sell cigarettes no differently than the rest of us.

I want to thank publicly Rep. Joe Sanfelippo and state Sen. Leah Vukmir (the proposal's sponsor in the Senate) for their hard work and dedication on the legislation. They get it!

Sadly, last week the Joint Committee on Finance decided not to take up the motion, which is extremely disappointing. Again, to me this is a no brainer.

But I leave it up to the citizens of Wisconsin: Would they prefer enhanced public safety in their communities, or cheaper cigarettes for sale at the nearest casino?