



# WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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## **Fiscal Hurdles Mount for Milwaukee County Parks; Peer Communities May Offer Solutions** *Report: Park system increasingly relies on revenue-generating measures such as fees, permits*

Growing constraints on property tax resources continue to challenge the operations and maintenance of the Milwaukee County Parks while also requiring greater reliance on revenues from fees, permits, and food and beverage sales.

This change in the parks' revenue mix creates a new set of policy questions for county leaders, but models from peer communities may offer some helpful insights, according to a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report.

An array of financial challenges facing the Milwaukee County Parks have been well-documented by the Forum, county officials and auditors, and several commissions during the past two decades. Yet despite growing public awareness of the problem, the parks' unmet operating and capital needs continue to grow.

To address this, the Milwaukee County Parks commissioned the Forum to conduct a research and facilitation project that would consider options for creating a sustainable financial path forward. This report is the first deliverable associated with that project.

The report examines, and draws lessons from, parks systems in Minneapolis, Cleveland, Seattle, Madison and Dane County, and Sonoma County, CA. It also considers the unique funding constraints faced by Milwaukee County leaders as the needs of the county parks grow.

The report notes that many potential solutions would require state approval and these measures continue to warrant consideration in Madison. It also suggests, however, that Milwaukee County leaders and parks stakeholders consider steps the county can implement independently in the near term, "including the potential for new partnerships with other public sector or nonprofit entities."

The report's financial analysis shows how the department's revenue mix has changed over the years to become increasingly reliant on earned revenues such as those generated from permits, admissions fees, food and beverage sales, and rentals.

"This current paradigm suggests that those contemplating the future of the Milwaukee County Parks should now view them as two distinct elements," the report finds. "A set of revenue-generating amenities and attractions that are essential to the department's fiscal well-being and that citizens therefore must continue to pay to use; and another set of traditional open spaces, trails, ballfields, playgrounds, etc. that provide largely unfettered access to the general public and that are essential to the parks system's historical mission."

Among the questions this raises is whether dual goals of maximizing earned revenue while maintaining robust and equitable public access to parks can successfully co-exist.

In addition to revisiting potential solutions to the parks' fiscal challenges that have been debated previously and that would require state approval – such as creating a dedicated property or sales tax for parks – the analysis points to some options enacted by peer park systems that potentially could be accomplished locally. These include:

- Building on existing partnerships with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District to possibly share maintenance and environmental protection responsibilities for certain parks or segments of parks;
- Establishing new partnerships with school recreation departments or nonprofit groups to enhance programming or provide services;
- Creating an enterprise fund that segregates revenue-generating parks amenities and requires them to collectively pay for themselves;
- Segregating regional attractions, such as Boerner Botanical Gardens or the Domes, into distinct organizational units and financing them separately from parks;
- Carving out a larger role for municipal governments within Milwaukee County for maintaining county-owned parks in their communities.

The report is intended to provide the parks department, elected officials, parks stakeholders, and citizens with multiple options. It is expected that they will take several weeks to consider these options and determine which (if any) they would like to explore in greater detail. Once those decisions are made, the Forum could be called upon to conduct the additional analysis needed to flesh out options and possibly move toward implementation.

"The ultimate aim," the report concludes, "is to provide for Milwaukee County policymakers and residents a detailed set of options to consider that will help overcome the decades-old financial challenges facing the parks and ensure their long-term success and sustainability."

[Click here to read the full report, "Sinking Treasure: A look at the Milwaukee County Parks' troubled finances and potential solutions."](#)

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