



Ald. Jim Bohl
(414) 708-2249

Joint News Release



Sup. Deanna Alexander
(414) 278-4259

A conversation about changing local government:

A response to state lawmakers' plan to restructure the Milwaukee County Board

January 22, 2013

Alderman Jim Bohl of the Milwaukee Common Council and Milwaukee County **Supervisor Deanna Alexander** meet regularly to discuss issues of mutual concern to their overlapping districts. Their talks often lead to ideas on possible areas of government consolidation to create efficiencies, improve services and create savings for taxpayers.

During a recent conversation about the state legislative proposal to reduce the County Board's office funding by 80 percent and hold a referendum on cutting the pay of the members of the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors from about \$50,000 per year to \$15,000 per year, the two elected officials traded several concepts about possible statewide and regional changes they believe would be much more substantial and meaningful to local communities.

"Supervisor Alexander and I see our degree of local governance in Wisconsin as systems of redundancy, causing unnecessarily high property taxation that has no doubt contributed to the exodus of residents and jobs from our state," Alderman Bohl said.

"We need more efficient and effective government at all levels," Supervisor Alexander said. "But the structure of Milwaukee County and its relationships with the state and other municipalities are letting us all down, despite the fact that most employees and public servants strive to provide great service."

"To look merely at one county's legislative branch for reform is essentially taking a small problem and recommending a small solution to it," Alderman Bohl said. "There is nothing wrong with that approach as a starting point. However, problems with local government in Milwaukee and Wisconsin are bigger than this, and are in need of bigger solutions."

County government – circa 1850s

Alderman Bohl and Supervisor Alexander said that the current county government and county board system in Wisconsin is badly outdated and duplicative—a system that, among other factors, created boundaries based upon a person's ability to be within one day's horseback or wagon travel of their county seat.

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Local government reform/ADD ONE

Alderman Bohl and Supervisor Alexander said if state legislators and the Greater Milwaukee Committee really want to address meaningful reform, they should be considering meaningful consolidation proposals to reduce duplicative services and multiple layers of government.

Supervisor Alexander noted that California, with an area two-and-a-half times larger than Wisconsin, has only 58 counties, while Wisconsin has 72. “California has a population of 38 million people. And while Wisconsin has almost six million people, it just does not make sense today for Wisconsin to have all these counties, each with its own board and government agencies,” she said.

“And while Milwaukee County is certainly unique when compared to other Wisconsin counties, the structure of its government is antiquated when compared to peer metro-regions across the country,” Alexander continued. “It seems that people want to compare all of Wisconsin’s counties to each other in order to make at least Milwaukee County toe the line. Yet no one seems to be pushing this great state to fully self-reflect and begin a plan for reform that is both tangible and meaningful.”

“Further, I am not afraid to publicly embrace reform, because that is what the people here elected me to do—read the reports, hear the complaints, crunch the numbers and make suggestions that will result in better governance,” Alexander said.

Raised in both Racine and Kenosha, Supervisor Alexander said that those two counties, which are adjacent and similar in size, could easily consolidate county agencies to create efficiencies and savings. “The Racine-Kenosha example just makes sense when you think about the fact that they are adjacent to one another, well-connected via roads and highways, and that each has its own sheriff’s department, its own department of public works, its own parks staff and its own administrative offices,” she said.

“I believe the residents of Racine and Kenosha Counties would see streamlined and better services, as well as significant savings, if a well-thought-out consolidation was to occur,” Supervisor Alexander said. “More importantly, I believe our state could function better and with less duplication if we re-evaluated all of our county boundaries and made some common sense decisions. In the end, we could significantly cut back the number of county boards, county board chairpersons and county executives across the state.”

“We should be asking the bigger question, which in my mind is, ‘Is the overall current county government structure in Wisconsin obsolete?’” Supervisor Alexander said.

Alderman Bohl said Milwaukee County and the City of Milwaukee each have their own comptroller, treasurer, and departments for public safety, development, and public works. “To me, it is ridiculous seeing a City of Milwaukee plow during a snowstorm with its blade up, driving on a Milwaukee County trunk highway, going to plow a city street blocks or miles away—or, for that matter, seeing a county snowplow with its blade up, driving on a larger city road, but headed to plow a county trunk highway or parkway,” he said.

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Local government reform/ADD TWO

Alderman Bohl said he and Supervisor Alexander are in agreement that it is time for lawmakers to, at the very least, consider consolidating certain local functions that can be performed more efficiently at a single municipal level. “I think residents would actually welcome a constructive dialogue in Madison about how we can create a framework for providing more efficient and more effective government services at the local level,” Alderman Bohl said.

“To cite one example, differing county and city requirements for parcels in the Park East corridor (located on the north side of the City of Milwaukee’s downtown) have made it difficult for developers who are looking to combine parcels and make development projects work,” Alderman Bohl said. “There is a belief that, had developers not been hindered by the nightmarish tangle of duplicative bureaucracy in the corridor, we’d be seeing more development there today.”

Alderman Bohl said the recent debate over other areas of city-county duplication, which has included questions about who should patrol the parks and the lakefront and who should handle cellular 911 calls, is also a “symptom pointing to a system that needs repair and improvement.”

Supervisor Alexander responded, “Problems that have ripple effects on diverse public interests surely need our attention. But quick and simple policy changes, however well-intentioned, are like putting a Band-Aid on a broken arm.”

Metro government

In the era of the Great Recession, with reductions in state aid, steep health care cost increases and declines in tax base and other revenue sources straining local governments and forcing them to make cuts for many years, the concepts of “metro government” and “New Regionalism” have come back into play. Nashville, Denver, Indianapolis, San Francisco, Kansas City, Jacksonville, Louisville and Portland have all adopted various models of metro government, and examples of “New Regionalism” have appeared closer to the Milwaukee area. Alderman Bohl and Supervisor Alexander said that that perhaps it is time to give a fresh new look to these or other local government designs for Milwaukee.

“There are limited resources at all levels of government,” Supervisor Alexander said. “But services are still needed, so it is logical to explore consolidating and collaborating—especially in Milwaukee County, where we have 19 different municipalities, all with various duplicative services and bureaucracies.”

Alderman Bohl points to the North Shore Fire Department, which has been serving seven municipalities on the north shore since 1995, as one example where the “New Regionalism” model of consolidation has worked. “The residents of each of those communities have benefited greatly by not having to pay for their own separate fire departments, while maintaining a level of fire protection and emergency medical services needed to serve the public interest,” he said.

“I believe we haven’t done much more than scratch the surface in terms of finding consolidated ways to maintain or enhance the level of some local services,” Alderman Bohl said. “When done right, it can be a net positive for tax payers—that is, provided local governments are willing to look beyond their own parochial interests toward reform.”

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Local government reform/ADD THREE

Moving forward

Both Alderman Bohl and Supervisor Alexander think recommendations for major changes to improve government services in local communities in Wisconsin must first pick up steam and take form in Madison. The Alderman said one spark that could begin the process is to look at possible “big solutions” in recommendations made by the Kettl Commission, the Governor’s blue-ribbon commission on state-local partnerships for the 21st Century.

The commission, created by then-Gov. Tommy Thompson, issued its report in 2001, putting forth 139 recommendations on ways Wisconsin government could be restructured. One key area of focus was that governments in Wisconsin should collaborate on a regional basis to provide taxpayers better service and spur economic growth.

“Some very good consolidation ideas relating to local government reform (municipal governance) were contained in the Kettl Commission’s report,” Alderman Bohl said. “I think the commission’s report is a document that is long overdue to be dusted off and given a second look in Madison.”

Supervisor Alexander noted that Wisconsin has long been a place where great ideas and experiments in the public sector have led to better services for residents. “We need our leaders in Madison to be bold in their initiative and desire to reform government,” she said, adding that major government changes can also be tested through regional and local pilot projects prior to full implementation.

“There are some great opportunities for reform and innovation, and I am hopeful that we’ll see positive movement on them,” she said. “I sense that our residents and taxpayers are eager for our leaders to try some new ways of doing the people’s business.”

Alderman Bohl said that while he doesn’t have a personal stake in the Milwaukee County Board legislative dust-up, he sees a positive discussion materializing in the debate. The dilemma, however, would be to assume that in its haste to push through this smaller legislative initiative, the Greater Milwaukee Committee and state legislators will squander the opportunity to find a more meaningful and long-lasting model of governance. “The debate is proper and absolutely necessary,” Alderman Bohl said. “I just hope it takes a turn toward more comprehensive reform.”