



Milwaukee County

Supervisor Deanna Alexander, 18th District

Comments on County's 2014 Adopted Budget

Milwaukee County's 2014 budget was finalized on November 21st, 2013. Highlights include tax levy remaining equal to 2013 levels, many proposals to cut public safety being denied, and public transit and parks receiving more attention than in recent years.

Supervisor Deanna Alexander offers the following personal insight to the 2014 budget and the process by which it was adopted:

Collaboration

I wish I could say that every elected official that had input to the 2014 budget had well practiced the art of compromise, but it was mostly haughty supermajority rule that captured the flag in budget deliberations. An onlooker might have been surprised to learn that there are no official or formal partisan caucuses on the County Board.

Surely some took a default position to vote against almost all new ideas. It seemed as if some did not even read the veto messages from the County Executive, which often provided new points of legal information and perspective for the board. It was also frustrating that a majority of the board was privy to the advice of outside legal counsel, while a minority of supervisors were excluded. I also joined several of my colleagues in finding it difficult to be active and informed with a minute-to-minute amendment agenda that was never made fully public before meetings began.

However, I used the information and resources that I did have to evaluate each amendment and veto on their merits, and remained consistently open to learning more from the County Executive, County Supervisors, and knowledgeable staff.

Many of my colleagues took extreme positions en masse. At our final meeting, I voted to override 17 vetoes, and to sustain 22 vetoes, but the average board member voted to override nearly every veto. In the end, just one veto was sustained, which preserved targeted case management services for individuals in the early stages of recovery from a substance abuse disorder. I, too, supported sustaining this veto.

As the County Board works to forge ways forward, amongst its members and in relation to other elected officials, I sincerely hope to see and be a part of more civility, conversation, and compromise in the public interest.

May this anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination remind of his words in *Profiles in Courage*:

“Compromise is what prevents each set of reformers... from crushing the group on the extreme opposite end of the spectrum.”

“It would be more comfortable to continue to move and vote in platoons, joining whomever of our colleagues are equally enslaved by some current fashion, raging prejudice or popular movement. But today this nation cannot tolerate the luxury of such lazy political habits... We shall need compromises in the days ahead, to be sure.”

Taxes and Spending

The County Executive made several errors totaling \$3 million in the recommended budget, and the County Board corrected those errors, balancing the budget before adoption.

The County Board also choose not to raise taxes in 2014. Because most County Board members have made it clear in the past that holding the line on taxes is antithetical to their priorities, this change in tune is certainly welcome.

While this is good news to taxpayers, it is important that we also remember to watch how government is spending the money it does tax. Many people don't realize that Milwaukee County spends over \$1.3 Billion every year. Even though the county will not be taking more from taxpayers in 2014, it will be spending more and borrowing more from future taxes than its debt limit allows. The county has also not funded enough money to the debt service reserve to meet the requirements of established financial policies, or the Comptroller's requests.

Transit

I am pleased that the County Board and County Executive both agreed to reduce fares for members of the public with limited independence, from \$4.00 per ride to \$3.50 per ride.

There is an ongoing debate about general bus transit that found its way into the budget. The County has issued an RFP for management of transit, and many people have expressed concern about which service provider will, or should, operate our public transit system.

The County Board, somewhat due to its own delays, has not even seen a contract proposal yet. Therefore, it seems short-sighted for the board to vote 16-2 to bind our actions by setting arbitrary and unnecessary deadlines that will likely lead to a political domino-effect of denying all contracts and fully insourcing transit operations in 2015.

Executive Salaries

I agree with the public and fellow board members that we should review executive salaries to determine if top cabinet members are overcompensated. However, the ways and means to address these issues, as passed in the County budget, are not based on sound or complete data, and were arbitrarily applied to some, rather than all, department directors.

The board voted 14-4, to move forward with what can be perceived as vindictive retaliation. I did not vote for the cuts because we did not have all of the evidence to know that it was the right decision, or even how much of a salary cut was in order. Instead, I supported waiting the estimated 60 days until the countywide assessment of employee salaries will be complete and the report and recommendations for correction made clear to us, so that we can work together for a good decision. Only at that point would reductions to employee salaries have been fair and warranted. But, alas, good policy analysis and simple policy-making are not the same.

Employee Benefits

Public employees are vital to all of us, but we will never be able to even out the differences of compensation packages offered by different governments, or by the public and private sectors, and right-size compensation on all levels if we continue to shoot efforts at fairness in the foot.

There were several options of employee health benefit packages available for the board to consider. Spending compromises proposed were quickly rejected. In the end, the board choose the most generous option, forgoing the opportunity to lower the tax levy or pay down debt by \$1.6 million.

To the board's credit, a majority has finally agreed to support what former County Supervisor Joe Sanfelippo proposed in 2012, and I re-proposed in early 2013, in evaluating the effects of the Affordable Care Act on county employees.

Mental Health

Over and over again, we debated whether to do more studies on how to best serve our most vulnerable population: those with behavioral health disorders.

There are not enough open beds in the community to move patients out of the county hospital immediately, but we don't need to do more research. There isn't supply of community beds because we are not allowing medical professionals, patients, and their families to demand them.

Government delay stifles the relationship between supply and demand, and we can't expect private service providers to jump through all the regulatory hoops to open facilities when we are the ones delaying. Instead, we must allow service providers to know that we are serious about moving our patients into the community. When we can give a bona fide indication of pending demand, and dates that patients will be there in need of help, the supply will follow.

Further, if we are serious about decentralizing such operations, we should have approved the proposed retention bonuses for our skilled behavioral health employees who can aid us in this transition. This is what a good employer who cares about both employees and services would do. Instead, the board voted to turn its back on these employees' concerns and uncertainties.

Many board members also disregarded data showing that "in house" Community Support Programs (CSPs) cost the County nearly \$11,000 per patient, per year, but that moving our last two CSPs to mirror many others that are operated by non-profit agencies would reduce those costs to less than \$4,000 per patient, per year. I hope that we can reevaluate such a possible transition in the future.

Parks

The County Executive originally proposed closing Noyes and Pulaski indoor pools. He was not wrong to make this suggestion, but the entire community conversation on the topics would have been more informed and less rooted in political activism had we all considered options and reason before jumping into action. The people of Milwaukee County made it clear that they want to keep the pools open and operating and in good repair and that a skate park was not a good fit for the Noyes Pool site. I am grateful to those private citizens who stepped forward to donate their own money to help repair the pools. Their willingness to help fund amenities they find valuable spoke volumes.

While I was able to support taking care of these assets the public values and that we have already heavily invested in, it was very disappointing that those with the opportunity to facilitate change were not willing to even glance toward notions of sustainability. While pool admission fees may not need to cover all pool expenses, the facilities should also not be a burdensome drain on the county checkbook. Even our government-provided golf courses produce revenue.

So, I am concerned that we may have “saved the pools “ for only a short time, because they will eventually be reconsidered for closure unless we find a responsible pathway toward increasing revenues and decreasing costs, which the board rejected even researching. If we do not find ways to reassess sustainability, I will unabashedly support reconsidering closure or a public-private partnership in the future.

It is good news is that our treasured parks system will be receiving a lot of attention in 2014. The bad news is that these improvements will be the result of “pork-barrel-cherry-picking.” Many parks improvements—notably those in districts whose supervisors voted to approve most budgetary items and overriding the bonding limit—were added to the budget at the last minute, and recommendations from professionals in the Parks Department were declined and ignored.

Public Safety

The adopted budget does lean towards protecting public safety, funding many of the County Executive’s unwarranted proposed cuts to the Sheriff’s Department. If our government existed for only one reason, it would be to provide for the public’s safety and security, so I believe it is entirely reasonable for the board to replace funding to the Office of the Sheriff.

We also reached a unanimous agreement to grant the City of Milwaukee 50% of the financial support needed to expand the ShotSpotter program, which helps law enforcement pinpoint the origin of gunshots fired in our most crime-affected areas. As of the final adoption of the Milwaukee County Budget, the city of Milwaukee has reached a milestone that could have been avoided: 94 murders in 2013, an increase over 2012 figures. Our approval of this funding will give law enforcement the tools they need to see that Milwaukee can reverse this shameful trend in 2014.

Summary

Overall, if every elected official did their best to do their research, reasonably collaborate, and serve their constituents, the people of Milwaukee County will be well served with the 2014 adopted budget.

I was chosen to represent the 18th district based on my heartfelt support for practical and honest government, public safety as a top priority, valuing safe and efficient public transit, and rebranding Milwaukee County. I have championed fiscal responsibility, seriously wanting to hear both sides of an issue before making decisions, and doing my best to communicate with the public about our government.

I sincerely thank my constituents and many others around Milwaukee County for their continued support as I work with other elected officials to balance the many demands on public resources and make the best decisions for our public.

In Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Deanna Alexander". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Deanna Alexander
Milwaukee County Supervisor
901 N. 9th St. Milwaukee, WI 53223
deanna.alexander@milwcnty.com