

December 1, 2021

Milwaukee Common Council
200 E. Wells Street, Room 205
Milwaukee, WI 53202

RE: Remove requirement for the Commissioner of Public Works to be a qualified professional engineer

Dear Milwaukee Common Council,

We want to express our congratulations to Commissioner Jeff Polenske and thank him for the enormous work he did making Milwaukee's streets better and safer. To the best of our knowledge, there wasn't a single bike lane in Milwaukee when Commissioner Polenske started his career at DPW 31 years ago.

However, to build upon Commissioner Polenske's achievements and move Milwaukee forward as a world class city in the 21st Century, Milwaukee Safe and Healthy Streets urges the council to amend chapter 7-01(2) of the Milwaukee City Ordinances to remove the requirement that the Commissioner of Public Works be a "qualified professional engineer."

We urge that this requirement be removed for three main reasons.

- First, we need a Commissioner who can accelerate the transformation of Milwaukee's streets away from designs developed more than 50 years ago that primarily focused on automobile convenience into streets that meet the needs of people—improving the pedestrian, bicycling, and transit experience. The Commissioner needs to be able to thoroughly communicate the vision of the City's 2018 Complete Streets policy throughout the entirety of the Department of Public Works. In doing so, they will create vibrant streets that help Milwaukee compete with peer cities across the country and combat our local reckless driving crisis. While engineers have valuable technical skills needed for constructing and managing infrastructure and traffic, they do not have a monopoly on the visionary skills necessary to design vibrant city streets. In fact, the skill set required to build vibrant city streets is much broader; it goes beyond technical understanding of standards and design guidelines. While some engineers do have this vision, we see peer cities that have appointed people from different professional backgrounds exceeding the public's expectations and delivering safer and healthier streets for their communities.
- Second, nationwide, 85.8% of civil engineers are male, and 73.9% of Civil engineers are white (non-Hispanic) (<https://datausa.io/profile/soc/civil-engineers>). A City as diverse as Milwaukee with goals and policies that aim to repair the harm that racism has inflicted should go above and beyond to ensure representation as a systems change—not essentially limit the pool of Commissioners to white men before the process has even started.
- Third, the requirement for the Commissioner to be a professional engineer is redundant. The City of Milwaukee already appoints a qualified professional engineer to serve in the role of City Engineer. This position is the second most influential position within the City's Department of Public Works. The City Engineer position approves plans and thoroughly meets the technical qualifications required to maintain city operations.

For all of these reasons, we should not limit the pool of potential Commissioners to professional engineers when there are so many other people with relevant expertise. We certainly do not object to visionary professional engineers being considered for the Commissioner position. However, to continue moving Milwaukee forward, we need to open up who is eligible to be the Commissioner of Public Works

and find the best person for such an important role. The professional engineering requirement should be removed.

Sincerely,

Robert Schneider and Caressa Givens
On behalf of Milwaukee Safe and Healthy Streets