



MAYOR CAVALIER JOHNSON
CITY OF MILWAUKEE

**2026 Milwaukee City Budget
Presentation to the Common Council
September 23, 2025**

As Prepared for Delivery

Honorable members of the Milwaukee Common Council, citywide elected officials, and honored guests, I present my 2026 Milwaukee city budget.

No task we undertake in our leadership roles is more fundamental, nor is any task more significant, than the allocation of resources to conduct the business of city government. Through this process we establish priorities and chart a sustainable course for the coming year and for the years ahead.

We have endured a particularly volatile and perilous period in recent years. It is no secret that as recently as three years ago Milwaukee confronted the possibility of fiscal calamity. Money from the American Rescue Plan Act was a temporary solution. Then a sales tax along with a recalibration of state shared revenue offered a reprieve.

The city's financial picture does have greater clarity now, but it is not a rosy image.

The cost to continue this year's programs and service levels for next year exceeded our projected revenue by more than \$100-million. Yes, we started with a gap of more than \$100-million for our 2026 budget. That's one of the largest gaps this city has ever seen.

To close the gap, we carefully balanced three approaches. There were careful withdraws from reserve accounts, departmental belt tightening, and revenue increases. Fully funding a budget of over \$2-billion will require user fees to increase about 4%, the property tax levy to go up 3%, and the vehicle registration fee to increase by ten dollars bringing ours in line with a number of communities around Wisconsin.

I do not anticipate layoffs associated with the 2026 budget because any staffing reductions should be accomplished by not filling vacancies.

We have a statutory obligation to balance our budget, and we have a moral obligation to balance that budget in a way that is both responsible and sustainable. I have pushed every department to continue looking for ways to do their work better.

As we fulfill our obligations, we attend to our policy priorities. This budget includes a multi-part commitment to public safety, an investment in housing affordability, in infrastructure, and in libraries.

I have consistently prioritized public safety in my budgets, and my 2026 executive budget is no exception. Again this year, I have included funding for training the maximum number of police recruits at our academy. I want more officers on the Milwaukee Police Department, and we have a statutory obligation to increase those numbers.

The Milwaukee Fire Department is on target to meet the obligation to grow its numbers. My budget calls for adding three full-time-equivalent positions, increasing fire investigation capabilities and reducing the likelihood of arson in the city.

The Office of Community Wellness and Safety under a new director will continue its work. I am pleased he is bringing a fresh approach that prioritizes positive outcomes.

Recent deadly crashes have alarmed me – and many others in Milwaukee. From the tragedies and the sadness, we are even more resolved to increase safety on our streets.

The fact is, traffic deaths have declined here, and I firmly believe our streets are safer because of investments we have made in traffic calming roadway improvements. Last year there was a seven percent decline in traffic fatalities, and this year there are strong indications we will see even greater safety.

In 2026, we will start a major road project on National Avenue that reduces the likelihood of crashes and deaths. And, we'll finish a similar project on Lisbon Avenue. You will see protected bike lanes, more trees, and a calmer roadway. Projects on Roosevelt, Hopkins, Oklahoma, and the Walnut-Lisbon corridor will all start next year, curbing reckless driving and making roadways safer for pedestrians and bicyclists.

We are awaiting more information regarding federal resources available to city government for flood damage and flood response stemming from the August 9th disaster. The Federal Emergency Management Agency is actively working with property owners and the Small Business Administration is here working with impacted businesses.

Again, I want to express my appreciation to city workers who responded and pivoted to the emergency. Our employees have done remarkable work that we all can be proud of. I know I am.

Part of the widespread flooding damage hit our libraries. A number of branches were shuttered for several days. I remain committed to our libraries because they provide valuable service, opening opportunity, knowledge and creativity for our residents. Like every department, we asked Milwaukee Public Libraries to economize. Even so, hours and staffing remain relatively steady.

Like other localities around the country, Milwaukee's economy has shown strength in recent years. Wages are rising, businesses growing, and employment has been solid. That's been good news for

the hardworking people who live in Milwaukee. People looking for work find opportunities in our city. Unemployment numbers have been relatively low.

We know from history, though, economic good times are often interrupted. In fact, warning signs have already appeared. So, as part of this budget I am directing resources to build employment opportunities. We are adding a position within the Department of City Development, and that person will be tasked with working with employers, existing local businesses along with businesses considering a new location.

I want Milwaukee to be the first choice for growing businesses so that our residents have increasing job opportunities.

Housing is another issue that is important to every person in our city. We are all aware of the growing costs of rent and homeownership. We are also cognizant of the ongoing need for quality residential choices.

This budget includes investments in Raze and Revive, the Milwaukee Home Downpayment Assistance Program, in the STRONG Homes Loan Program, the Compliance Loan Program, and the HOMES MKE effort. We will continue to promote homeownership, and we will continue to compel landlords to follow the laws on safety and livability.

I want our housing efforts to boost neighborhood stability, to increase safety, and to build value for our residents. There are efforts underway in several different city departments to strengthen housing in Milwaukee, efforts I support. In the coming months I will focus additional attention on the work that's underway because I intend to make 2026 to be the "Year of Housing" in our city.

There is no question our resources are limited. We simply do not have the money available to accomplish all the things we would like to. However, that does not stop us from doing the work of city government better.

While Council members and I have periodic differences of opinion, it is clear we share much more in common. We all want our residents to have stability, opportunity, and safety. We want our children to have hope and success. And, in this annual budget process we share the desire to strengthen city finances, improve government efficiency, and adapt city operations to meet the moment.

Yes, we have fiscal challenges. At the same time, we are increasing our investments in roadways, planning a new branch library and a permanent home for the busy Midtown early voting site. We're funding the maximum number for police recruits, and adding to the Fire Department's numbers. Importantly, we're focused on the future with resources to attract jobs and improve housing options.

The budget I present reflects the values we share. I thank the budget office team for its diligence and thoroughness, and I look forward to working with each of you to shepherd this fiscal plan forward.