

NewsBank InfoWeb

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI)

March 29, 2001

Slim the Common Council

By RESLER

Section: ANews

Edition: Final

Page: 18

Estimated Printed Pages: 2

Article Text:

From a strictly mathematical standpoint, the answer is as clear as two and two: Milwaukee's population shrunk by 31,114 in the last decade, so it seems only logical that the size of the 17-member Common Council should be reduced accordingly.

But other considerations besides math need to be factored in. Such as how to increase representation on the council for minorities, who now outnumber whites in Milwaukee. Or how to best preserve the long and solid tradition of having enough aldermen so the needs of the entire city -- and its many distinct neighborhoods -- are adequately addressed. That's especially important in Milwaukee because of the expectation of strong municipal services.

Ald. Michael Murphy thinks he has found a way to meet both goals. He would reduce the size of the council to 15. Each alderman would represent about 40,000 residents, almost exactly the ratio back in 1980 when there were 16 aldermen and roughly comparable to the current population per aldermanic district.

Some community groups believe the council actually ought to be expanded to ensure even greater ethnic and geographic representation, but that would be hard to justify. Even a 15-member council would put Milwaukee near the top of the list among large cities in terms of fewest constituents per alderman. In size alone, the Common Council is already the third-largest among 15 big cities with council structures similar to Milwaukee's. One of the 15 is Chicago, for example, which has 50 aldermen for a population of 2.9 million, or one per 58,000 people.

At a time when Milwaukee is faced with a shrinking population and a deficit -- each alderman is now paid \$62,000 a year -- keeping the status quo may not be fiscally responsible.

Cutting the size of the council to 15 could save about \$1.4 million over four years, Murphy says. But economy alone shouldn't be the primary incentive. The more pressing reason, he correctly points out, should be to give minorities greater representation. Minority aldermen now hold seven seats -- 41% of the council. If there were seven minorities on a 15-member council, minorities would have 47% of the seats.

Unfortunately, reducing the size of the council may still be a hard sell because of political and parochial considerations. Obviously, those things do matter to many if not most politicians. But wouldn't it be nice if they didn't matter quite so much?

Copyright 2001 Journal Sentinel Inc.

Record Number: 2001032908470700