



MAYOR CAVALIER JOHNSON
CITY OF MILWAUKEE

November 18, 2025

Honorable Members of the Common Council:

I am returning the 2026 Milwaukee City Budget with the attached vetoes.

My objections to the amendments made to my proposed fiscal plan for 2026 fall into two principal categories. First, I object to the additional financial burden imposed on our residents by the changes the Council has made, and, second, I object to the organizational changes included in the Council amendments.

I do not deliver these vetoes lightly. I have carefully reviewed all of the changes to spending and positions in order to fully appreciate the authors' intentions and the amendments' implications. I have concluded some of the amendments are entirely acceptable, and I have incorporated those changes into the budget.

I have consistently advocated for responsible fiscal restraint, working to keep costs down for our residents. The budget I submitted to the Council included a necessary increase in the tax levy commensurate with maintaining the services our residents expect. The levy increases added on by the Council are unprecedented in recent years, totaling millions of additional dollars added to the property tax. In fact, the Council additions for 2026 are seven times as large as the past two years combined.

I will also point out the tax levy increases will impact taxpayers differently depending upon how their property assessments changed. So, for example, homeowners in the 15th Aldermanic District are likely to see an even bigger increase because assessments there rose much more than the citywide average. The same is true in the 7th, 8th and 12th Aldermanic Districts.

City government must be sensitive to the financial pressures facing our constituents. Their wallets are already hurting from inflation and federal benefit cuts. We have to keep our tax bills as low as reasonably possible.

Among the changes I concur with is an additional one percent increase in general city employee compensation beyond what I initially proposed. I greatly value the work our employees do, and I believe the increased compensation is justified. The additional revenue recognized by the Comptroller, subsequent to the time I offered my budget plan, makes the three-percent increase for general city employees appropriate.

I am vetoing the additional base pay increase for general city employees who are Milwaukee residents. While I certainly want employees to reside in the community they serve, this increase beyond the existing three-percent differential, calls for further discussion. Is there a better way to

incentivize residency? This deserves additional analysis before advancing a base pay increase for employees living in Milwaukee. I am eager to work with the Council on developing and implementing innovative ideas to bring our staff closer to home.

Perhaps the most important question for this item, and all the changes to my proposed budget, is this one: are the changes sustainable? During the review of the 2026 budget, Council members were recurrently informed that budgets over coming years will be increasingly tight with obligations and expectations exceeding anticipated revenue. Difficult decisions must be made now so that decision-making in the future is not calamitous.

With that in mind, I am vetoing several provisions added to my proposed budget within the Common Council/City Clerk department. As all city departments have been asked to find economies and reductions in their annual budgets, the Council has consistently added to its funding. Some budget line additions, such as funding toward the Big Clean and Hip-Hop Week seem illogical when there are hundreds-of-thousands of dollars available in unused money from previous years. The Innovation District funds were added without a clear plan for expending the money and after not even being requested in the formal budget process. Another example of an excessive budget line is travel, where the Council's Legislative Affairs Division (LAD) seeks reimbursements for personal vehicle travel to Madison when their colleagues at my administration's Intergovernmental Relations Division (IRD) seek just a fraction of that reimbursement. The numbers are striking. Over the past three years, LAD staff has logged more than \$15,000 in travel reimbursement mostly for using their own personal cars while, at the same time, IRD staff sought less than \$2,000 in similar reimbursements by using a city-provided pool car.

I am also vetoing changes to my proposal for the Milwaukee Public Library. I share the Council's interest in supporting libraries and maximizing the hours that libraries are open to our residents. The most sustainable way forward is to incorporate a new staffing model the City Librarian is currently developing, so that by next summer, we could achieve the goal of increased Sunday hours without increasing the cost to taxpayers. I believe this is a compromise that supports access to libraries while maximizing efficiencies.

We have faced some challenging decisions in the capital budget, including the replacement of Fire Department vehicles. Recognizing the department's need, I want new fire trucks replaced at a sustainable pace, so I am vetoing the funding included in the Council amendments. What I do support is adding \$4-million in borrowing for fire trucks in addition to the \$2-million I initially proposed. This would represent the largest annual investment the city has ever made in fire truck replacement. What I also oppose is taking millions of dollars needed to address the building needs of the Department of Public Works for this purpose. Those DPW expenses are not avoidable, so the fire truck funding plan advanced through Council amendments simply puts off the inevitable. Again, I am proposing a compromise to provide a historic level of support for the Fire Department while simultaneously recognizing other city needs.

I am particularly troubled by unnecessary and complicating changes made by amendment to the budget in the Department of Administration (DOA).

I am vetoing the Council's pointless and heartless firing of a staff person in DOA's innovation office. This person has worked hard and effectively to find efficiencies and advancements that save taxpayers money and improves city services. The removal of this staff person by Council action undermines those efforts, and, at the same time, lacks any thoughtful justification. Our city employees deserve more respect than this amendment imparts.

I am also vetoing the restructuring by Council amendment of DOA's Office of Equity and Inclusion (OEI) and the Office of Community Wellness and Safety (OCWS). OEI is part of DOA because

that structure promotes efficiency and collaboration. OEI's principal function is to support the work of other departments and is fittingly located within DOA. I am not opposed, in the long run, to allowing OCWS to stand as an independent department. However, that change requires planning and preparation. I ask that the Council join me in supporting the OCWS move starting in 2027.

No Milwaukee mayor over the past 75 years, except me, previously served on the Common Council. With that background, I fully understand the role and responsibility our legislative body has in the annual budget process. I know Council members have invested numerous hours delving into the details of the 2026 city budget, and I appreciate that work. As we reach the end of this process, I ask that you join me in one final review of the fiscal and administrative consequences of the Council-passed amendments. I ask that you sustain my vetoes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cavalier Johnson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Cavalier Johnson
Mayor