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City of Milwaukee

File #: 250001

Public Comment Regarding City of Milwaukee - File 250001

Communication from the
Mayor relating to the
proposed 2026 budget

Saturday, October 18, 2025

Mayor Cavalier Johnson, Alderwoman Moore, Madame Chair, Common
Council,

My public comment presents a comprehensive and evidence-based critique of the City of Milwaukee's 2026 budget, grounded in direct source material, public testimony, and review of reports in the file. It reflects my position as a resident of the 10th Aldermanic District and community advocate committed to transparency, accountability, and public safety. Each section identifies structural risks, policy failures, and administrative gaps that undermine the city's ability to deliver essential services, protect its workforce and families, and uphold civic trust.

Local elected officials are not party operatives; they are public servants accountable to the residents of Milwaukee. Your duty is to represent our neighborhoods, not political platforms. As Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” If elected officials fail to prioritize the public interest, we the people reserve the right to lobby the Wisconsin State Legislature to restructure the Milwaukee Common Council into a part-time body to reduce costs and restore focus. This change would likely require enabling legislation at the state level, as Milwaukee is governed under a home rule charter authorized by Chapter 62 of the Wisconsin Statutes. The Common Council’s structure—including compensation and term length—is determined by local ordinance, but any fundamental shift to part-time status would require either a charter ordinance amendment or a statutory change initiated by the Legislature. While the exact mechanism may involve coordination between city and state governance, this is not a threat—it is a promise. Civic accountability is not optional. It is the foundation of public trust.

FAILED SURVEY METHODOLOGY

I am deeply concerned about the City of Milwaukee’s budget process, particularly after reviewing and completing the 2026 Budget Feedback Survey [2026 Budget Feedback Survey]. The absence of open-ended fields prevents respondents from explaining their answers, flattening complex experiences

into mere numbers. Questions are duplicated across pages without normalization, creating potential for double-counting. The lack of skip logic forces residents to answer questions about services they do not use, such as libraries or public transportation, which can produce misleading results. Inconsistent wording across questions fragments analysis and confuses respondents, raising the question of whether the survey was created by multiple authors. Overall, these surveys fail to correlate budget priorities with service satisfaction, cannot trace civic harm, and cannot validate improvements over time. For example, there is no questions to determine whether street maintenance, public lighting, or garbage collection has improved or deteriorated. I must email this very public comment because there's no ability to add a document or sufficient webform character space at the end of 2026 Budget Feedback Survey.

TAX STABILIZATION FUND WITHDRAWS

The 2026 City of Milwaukee budget presents structural dangers and fiscal risks. A proposed \$32.3 million withdrawal from the Tax Stabilization Fund (TSF) matches the 2025 amount, despite Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) guidance recommending a \$147.4 million minimum reserve [LRB TSF Briefing]. With an unassigned balance of \$66.6 million as of January 1, 2025, this withdrawal equals 48.5% of that balance—approaching the statutory ceiling. Rating agencies have warned that repeated TSF

withdrawals to cover operating deficits signal structural imbalance [LRB Comptroller Briefing]. Debt service pressure is mounting, with \$272.1 million in total debt service for 2026, including \$123 million supported by the tax levy [LRB Capital Improvements Briefing]. Debt service now consumes 32% of the total tax levy [Budget Overview Presentation]. Fitch, Moody's, and S&P maintain investment-grade ratings (A-/A3/A+), but all cite reserve depletion and operating reliance on debt as downgrade triggers [LRB Comptroller Briefing].

BALLOONING VEHICLES REGISTRATION FEES

The proposed increase in the vehicle registration fee from \$30 to \$40 per vehicle [Mayor's Budget Address] will result in Milwaukee residents paying \$145 annually in combined state, city, and county fees. This has a regressive impact on low-income drivers, and no offset mechanism—such as a rebate or exemption—has been proposed for vulnerable households [Wisconsin Policy Forum].

BUDGET WARNINGS AND MISSING LINE ITEMS

Suspicious irregularities in the capital budget include a \$96.1 million gap between departmental requests (\$328.7 million) and proposed funding (\$232.6 million), with no transparent prioritization rubric disclosed [Capital Improvements Presentation]. The Fire Department requested \$54.5 million

but received only \$5 million; the Police Department requested \$22.9 million and also received \$5 million. The “Special Projects” capital account jumps from \$10.5 million in 2025 to \$35.4 million in 2026—a \$24.9 million increase—with no itemized breakdown provided [Capital Improvements Presentation]. The City Clerk’s Office requested \$7.1 million for Room 205 renovation and basement exhibit space [LRB City Clerk Briefing], but only \$120,000 was approved for the Enterprise Records Management System, with no rationale provided for rejecting the remaining \$7 million.

PRIORITIES VS BUDGET

Systemic risks and underfunded mandates are evident. Despite flood damage acknowledged in the Mayor’s address, no capital funding has been allocated for branch-level library repairs [Mayor’s Budget Address][Capital Improvements Briefing]. While \$3 million is allocated for Central Library roof/façade and security upgrades, branch-level resilience remains unfunded. Public safety technology gaps persist, with the Police Department’s \$10 million request for a Joint Public Safety Radio upgrade and \$1.2 million for a Case Management System replacement both unfunded [Capital Improvements Briefing], risking operational failure or noncompliance with federal standards. Grant volatility is another concern: a \$9 million ECO energy benchmarking grant is flagged as “high risk for cancellation” [Grant & Aid Presentation], and the Health Department is losing \$6.4 million in grants due to expiration and cancellation,

with no contingency plan disclosed for service continuity [Grant & Aid Presentation].

PROJECTS WITHOUT REVENUE STREAMS

The termination of the UWM-Zilber PILOT agreement is another fiscal risk. The 2025 PILOT payment is prorated to five months only [Comptroller Follow-up on PILOTs], and File 231947 confirms termination. No replacement revenue stream has been identified, raising the risk of precedent-setting PILOT exits without fiscal backfill. Revenue fragility is further underscored by a \$2.1 million (−28.2%) drop in miscellaneous revenue, primarily investment income [LRB Treasurer Briefing]. Short-term investment balances are projected to fall by \$43.8 million and long-term by \$7.1 million. The expiration of ARPA funds and lower cash reserves are cited, with no compensatory revenue source identified.

VACANCIES TO IMPROVE THE BUDGET REMAIN

Administrative and staffing concerns include 25 vacancies in the Department of Administration, with 14.5 active and 8.5 unfunded or grant-dependent positions [LRB DOA Briefing]. These include critical roles such as Environmental Sustainability Manager, Systems Integration Manager, and Grant Compliance Coordinators, posing risks of operational bottlenecks in climate, IT, and grant administration. The City Attorney's budget for Damages

& Claims SPA increased by \$600,000 to \$2.5 million [LRB City Attorney Briefing], yet actual 2024 expenditures were \$5.96 million—more than double the 2025 budget. No litigation reserve or risk mitigation strategy has been disclosed.

MISSING SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SAFETY AND HEALTHY NEIGHBORHOODS

The Milwaukee Fire Department’s budget must reflect future realities, not outdated assumptions. Budgets should anticipate risk before it becomes tragedy, replace equipment before it fails, and fund departments based on evolving needs. Milwaukee’s fire crews are responding to high-rise emergencies with ladder trucks that no longer meet UL safety ratings, putting lives at risk. Downtown is no longer a commuter-only zone; it now houses families, seniors, and working-class residents. Infrastructure must reflect this shift. These high-rise buildings now contain stoves, ovens, space heaters, and lithium-ion battery-powered electronics, increasing ignition sources, thermal load, and vertical risk. Fire crews must navigate not just height, but heat, voltage, and volatility stacked floor by floor.

SUPPORT CITY EMPLOYEES AND THEIR FAMILIES

I support city workers calling for urgent action to address compensation concerns. During a recent joint public hearing, union representatives from

AFSCME Local 47 demanded a 6.5% raise in the 2026 budget. Ian Gunther, chief steward, highlighted dire conditions in the Department of Neighborhood Services and Milwaukee Water Works, noting that workers have not received raises that keep pace with inflation. The Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission recommended nearly 17% in raises since 2023, but actual increases have only been around 3–4%. Pam Fent, president of the Milwaukee Area Labor Council, emphasized that general city employees perform essential duties and criticized the lack of raises amid rising living costs and healthcare premiums. Dane McNeil reinforced the call for a 6.5% raise, stressing the importance of the Department of Neighborhood Services in maintaining safe and clean neighborhoods. These discussions reflect growing concern about financial stability and the need for fair compensation, highlighting the intersection of labor rights and community welfare. Support AFSCME Local 47 and the healthy neighborhoods they produce.

THE UNSUSTAINABLE FUTURE OF THE STREETCAR, “THE LAMBORGHINI DREAM”

The Milwaukee Streetcar system is fiscally unsustainable and structurally flawed. Its limited two-mile loop offers no viable expansion prospects, and Act 12 prohibits the use of property tax revenue for future growth. The system’s \$6.9 million operating cost is covered by \$4.2 million in parking revenue and \$2.7 million in sponsorship and grant funds—an irresponsible allocation that

diverts resources from core services. The streetcar primarily serves a narrow demographic and fails to meet broader transportation needs. Shutting it down could trigger a \$48 million repayment to the Federal Transit Administration and jeopardize future federal funding, but continuing to operate a system with declining ridership and rising costs is equally reckless. The 2026 budget anticipates an 18% increase in operating costs while projecting a drop in annual ridership from 532,460 to 490,000. Despite recent gains in August and September, the long-term trajectory remains negative. The city has hired a new manager and expects \$1 million more in streetcar-related revenue, but these measures do not address the fundamental lack of sustainability. The Potawatomi Hotel & Casino remains the presenting sponsor under a \$10 million, 12-year agreement, yet even this support cannot justify continued investment in a system that fails to deliver equitable or efficient transit outcomes.

PROTECT MILWAUKEE RESIDENCE AND RESTORE PRE 2012 MUNICIPAL COURT CITIZEN ACCOUNTABILITY

I call for the immediate reopening of Milwaukee Municipal Court and an end to failed soft-on-crime policies. The recent fatal crash at 35th & Vliet, involving innocent families destroyed, underscores the urgency of restoring meaningful penalties for reckless driving and municipal violations. The court remains shuttered, citations are meaningless, and cashless bail for misdemeanors

continues. Milwaukee leadership refused to enforce its own Ordinance 101-1 and adopted Wisconsin Statutes, allowing individuals with active municipal warrants to have multiple police contacts before arrest. This is not reform—it is abandonment. As documented in my June 9, 2025 message to the State Legislature, Milwaukee could reopen its Municipal Court immediately and restore traffic citations with meaningful penalties, including jail time where authorized. Until leadership reverses these policies, every death on our streets is a policy-driven outcome. I document this publicly so no one can claim ignorance. Reopen Municipal Court. Reinstate penalties. Restore public safety.

SUPPORT MILWAUKEE LAW ENFORCEMENT

The Milwaukee Police Association has consistently emphasized the need for budget priorities that reflect the operational realities and staffing demands of the department. As the city faces rising public safety concerns and increasing calls for service, the Association has warned that current staffing levels are insufficient to meet community needs. Officers are stretched thin across districts, with mandatory overtime becoming a routine substitute for adequate personnel coverage. Act 12, the 2023 sales tax legislation, further complicates the fiscal landscape by imposing restrictions on how property tax revenue can be allocated, including limitations on funding public safety expansions. These constraints have made it difficult for the department to recruit, retain, and properly equip officers, even as crime trends and community expectations

demand a more robust response. The Association argues that without a clear budget commitment to restoring and sustaining police staffing, Milwaukee risks undermining both officer safety and public trust.

It is my wish that the aforementioned sections identifying structural risks, policy failures, and administrative gaps that undermine the city's ability to deliver essential services be therefore amended in the 2026 budget to protect its workforce and uphold civic trust.

The City of Milwaukee exists to serve all residents by fostering equity, safety, sustainability, and opportunity through transparent governance, economic innovation, and community-driven public services. The current file does not accomplish this. The early lesson that our parent taught us, "no" we must continue in adulthood. Milwaukee residence must be able to age in their home.

Dated this 18th day of October 2025 in the city and county of Milwaukee.

By: Electronically signed by Joseph Duncan
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