

Joint Finance Committee Budget Hearing Remarks
Erik Brooks | Mayor, City of South Milwaukee
April 10, 2019

Good morning, and thank you for making the trip to Milwaukee County's South Shore. Welcome!

Thank you to Mayor Bukiewicz for hosting this hearing, and thank you to Representative Rodriguez for her invitation to speak today, and her service to the 21st Assembly District.

And thank you to Senator Larson for his continued service to the 7th Senate District as well.

My name is Erik Brooks, and I'm the mayor of the City of South Milwaukee, a city of about 21,000 people and 4.8 square miles on the shores of Lake Michigan ... famously home to Grant Park, the jewel of the Milwaukee County Parks system -- and Da Crusher.

If you don't know who that is, check out Crusherfest on June 8-9, and the unveiling of the statue honoring this iconic local wrestler at our bustling downtown farmers' market.

We were a company town for many years. Bucyrus workers in South Milwaukee famously made the shovels that dug the Panama Canal, and we still make things to this day.

- Caterpillar still produces huge mining shovels.
- Everbrite's workers in South Milwaukee make most McDonald's signs you see east of the Mississippi, as well as most Red Boxes.
- Eaton makes the device that causes your lights to flicker and hopefully stay on during a storm – it's called a recloser, and it was invented here.

We're also home to the Great Lakes' oldest water treatment facility, a first class performing arts center, terrific schools ... and the Grobschmidts.

Chet, our former mayor, turned 98 recently, and our pool and senior center proudly bear his name. Of course, many of you may remember Rick, his son, who left us much too soon in 2016.

I think about Rick's legacy today – as a man who was famous for working across the aisle to get things done in Madison. He didn't view compromise as a four-letter word, and he cherished opportunities for bipartisanship.

I wonder what he would be thinking of today's Madison, where Democrats and Republicans are reportedly barely even talking to each other these days, lobbing rhetorical bombs at each other when they do, and heading to court to sort it all out.

The first few months of divided government have further polarized a polarized state, and instead of lawmakers working to unite us, we get the opposite.

I fear the budget process will be another example of that. But I have hope.

I have hope that you, the Joint Finance Committee, your colleagues and the governor will ultimately put their partisan differences aside starting with the budget process ... coming together around common sense ideas that move Wisconsin forward and improve the lives of the people who live here – the millions who call our cities, villages and towns home.

I represent 21,000 of those people. And I stand before you today asking for your help in making our jobs a little easier, for your help in making sure we can continue to deliver our services in the manner and at the level our residents have come to expect of us.

Police, fire, paramedics, public health, our library and senior center, garbage pickup, and, yes, snowplowing – even on an April day like this – we deliver these on the front lines of government every day. We are the government people see most often, and what they rely on most.

Levy limits make that job increasingly difficult.

You will hear a lot of suggestions today and throughout these hearings, so I will make mine short and sweet: **Deliver common-sense levy limit reform in this budget.**

Keep alive the proposals Governor Evers has put forth, especially the one to allow communities to increase their levy from the prior year by 2% or by net new construction, whichever is greater. That small change alone would impact millions of residents of this state for the better, as it will allow us to more adequately fund the services they need and use every day or week.

Here is South Milwaukee's story, in summary ...

For 11 straight years, our “net new construction” figure – used to calculate how much we can increase our base levy, our largest source of revenue – has measured less than 1%. For 2019, it was 0.3%, meaning we were only able to increase our levy by approximately \$22,000.

\$22,000. On a \$19 million budget. And it was worse in previous years.

This is not sustainable. Costs go up, and we're not allowed to reflect that in our budgets because the state has hamstrung us on revenue. And what if we want to give our people a raise, or if we want to add services? What do we do then?

I'll tell you one thing we can't do: Cut fat. We did that long ago. Cuts now are cuts to people, and services. The days of Cadillac benefits are long gone too. We certainly seek ways to do things better through efficiencies and partnerships, but those only go so far.

South Milwaukee went to referendum in 2017, to ensure we can adequately fund our paramedic program and add two new police officers. It passed 2-to-1.

While that allowed us to increase our levy and helped solve that problem, this is no way to fund a government. “One-off” solutions like this don't solve the problem.

You can help solve the problem, with levy limit reform.

And don't do it for us. Do it for the hundreds of communities like us across the state, big and small, blue and red, urban and rural, rich and poor, in every legislative district, including yours.

There's a lot of data here, but I'll offer this point from the Wisconsin Policy Forum ...

During 2012-16, only 62 of nearly 600 cities and villages averaged new construction rates of 2% per year or more, while 186 averaged 0.5% or less.

186 at 0.5% or less. And for many like us, this has been the case for a decade. We are not alone in doing more with less, literally.

Please fix this in the next state budget.

I'm not asking for more shared revenue or other state aids, although there is a strong case for that as well. Others will make that case. Today, I'm simply asking you to give us the tools and funding flexibility we need to do our jobs at the local level.

Enact common sense levy limit reform and, in doing so, make a stand for local government and for local control -- and for the residents we serve, your constituents.

Thank you.