

## **Alderman Backes Update**

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Hey folks! It's been a little bit. The last couple months have been a whirlwind for me professionally and personally, and so I've not been able to provide an update in the last month and a half or so. But I'm back today and eager to share my city-related thoughts with you once again!

I was not at the most recent city council meeting—my first absence in my two years on the council—because I was attending a family funeral out in California. However, I do have a variety of assorted thoughts and updates to share with you this week, some more city-related than others.

Here we go!

### ***The Sound of Music***

I was kept insanely busy recently by my position as the director of the theatre program at South Milwaukee High School, where I'm an English and drama teacher. We mounted the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic *The Sound of Music* from March 17-19 in the South Milwaukee PAC.

The event was a huge success. It was a great production by the students, and there was a large amount of community support. We had great attendance over the weekend, especially at the Sunday show, which had around 550 people in the house. Students hadn't had a chance to work on a classic in several years, and many went from not knowing *The Sound of Music* at all to loving it.

A huge thank you to those of you who came out to support the production. The arts are such a critical avenue for growth, learning, and self-expression in public schools, and they can use all the support they can get from communities. We're really fortunate to have fantastic arts educators at the high school, and I've learned a lot from them this year!

### **Mural update**

As you may recall, the city recently put out requests for mural artists to submit their concept art and budget requests for a mural that would be painted on the west-facing brick facade of Human Concerns. The money for this project would come out of the grants provided by the Bucyrus Foundation to the city for various projects in its downtown area. [Remember: the Foundation is giving \$10 million to the city over 10 years: \$8 million to the city itself and \$2 million to the school district].

The deadline has passed for these submissions, and those of us who are on the mural committee (which includes yours truly) received our first look at the concept art in advance of our meeting on April 6 at city hall. I was absolutely floored by the submissions.

We received over 100 submissions from artists all over the globe, and the task is now ours to narrow down the list progressively so we can hopefully have an artist working on the job over the summer.

The murals were ideally something apolitical, unrelated to history or historical figures or major city names. Something neutral with a positive message, and hopefully something that encourages interaction. It should have some kind of vibe that meshes well with the direction we're trying to head as a city: forward-looking and enthusiastic.

We had artists from right here in South Milwaukee submit designs, but also artists from all over the state, country, and world—including countries entirely across the planet. I was stunned at the turnout for this project. I guess I didn't really know what to expect.

Those of us on the committee certainly have plenty of fabulous options to choose from. I'll keep you updated as we begin the narrowing-down process.

Very excited for the work on this to begin!

## **SDSM budgeting**

The biggest issue at hand in the city of late is actually not something under the purview of the city council: it's the school district's budget shortfalls and cuts.

Unfortunately, this city is no stranger to budget crises with the school district, through little fault on the part of the district. This goes back to a broken and shortsighted model for funding education in the state of Wisconsin passed by the state legislature in the early 1990s. Districts that were fiscally conservative and kept their spending in check were given less funding under that model than districts that spent a lot of money, even if irresponsibly. South Milwaukee has historically operated as a very financially responsible district, and the funding model for the last 30 years under state law has punished us for that historical responsibility.

While this is a problem that was caused by the state legislature 30 years ago or so, this is also a problem that could be solved by the state legislature *right now*. The school board and the district are likely get most of the blowback from our citizens and families served by the district, but it is the state legislature that really deserves the grilling.

Currently the state is sitting on a pretty massive pile of money that has been characterized by some as a "surplus." However, as leaders in our district and our state have quite accurately said, you can't really call it a surplus if you're not actually paying your bills. It'd be like me not paying my mortgage for 20 years and saying "wow, look at all the extra money I have!"

Here's where I mention once again that I am employed by the school district as a teacher at the high school, and everything that is in this article is my own personal opinion.

Public education budgets keep getting cut and cut and cut, largely for political reasons. The combination of inflation and the decreased funding by the state over time has led to what is essentially a manufactured crisis. If the legislature really wanted, it could end problems with public education funding in the state tomorrow with a new bill and some strokes of the pen by the governor, who would almost certainly be only too happy to approve an influx of spending toward public education, which so sorely needs it.

There are undoubtedly those who will jeer at this and say “well golly gee, these people just want to spend our money!” to which I reply: well, yeah, that’s what it’s there for. What good is that money doing sitting and collecting dust while our children are suffering from lost opportunities caused by lack of support for public education? We pay taxes so our money can be used to benefit the society around us, not so it can be held captive by a bunch of salty legislators who are too busy pouting about having a governor they don’t like to actually gavel into a meeting and have a legitimate discussion about these issues.

Because really, ultimately, it is the kids who are suffering from this. Yes, teachers in our buildings will be asked to pick up the slack as districts continue to eliminate positions, resulting in more work being placed on already burnt-out professionals. Yes, districts will continue to see even more teachers leaving for other districts that can pay more, or teachers leaving the profession entirely.

But it’s the kids who have to deal with revolving doors of teachers caused by a manufactured financial crisis. The kids lose opportunities in elective and extracurricular classes, some of which provide incredible advantages for students going on to professional careers or further education. The kids are put into classrooms with larger numbers of students, where teachers are not able to spend enough time working with each student individually. [Sidebar: let me tell you, as an English teacher, it is already nearly IMPOSSIBLE to conference individually with every single student on their essay rough drafts in a way that gives every student the complete attention they deserve].

I’d love to be able to tell you that this issue could be resolved at the polls for state senate and state representative, but the gerrymandering in this state has made it very difficult for there to be much turnover in the elections themselves, meaning there is not really any systemic accountability in place for these legislators who refuse to do their jobs and operate in good faith. So, in a sense, we’re in a state of gridlock until there is larger systemic change.

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That’s all for this time, folks. As always, please feel free to reach out to me at [tbackes@smwi.org](mailto:tbackes@smwi.org) with questions, compliments, complaints, or pictures of your dogs.

Have a great week.