

Alderman Backes Update

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Hello South Milwaukee,

Generally I use this space to provide updates on matters that were voted on at council meetings or to share some positive things happening around the city. However, today I feel the need to address something that happened at this week's council meeting that I felt was inappropriate and unbecoming of our city. (If you follow my Alderman page on social media, you are already aware of some of what's to come).

Last night, the mayor awarded Representative Jessie Rodriguez a special proclamation on behalf of the common council and city, thanking her for her efforts in securing additional funding for small communities like ours in the state budget.

Unfortunately, the money received is far less than what our city needs. In addition, it is worth pointing out that there were far more parties than Rep. Rodriguez that had a significant role in this, and it took years and years of lobbying for Rep. Rodriguez to go to bat for South Milwaukee to even get these table scraps.

However, the larger issue here is that the state budget is an absolute insult to our school district, of which I am an alumnus and employee, where my children will soon become students, and which is the cornerstone of our community.

The reality is that Rep. Rodriguez has played an active role in the state drying up funding for public education while continually giving more and more aid to private schooling. This is putting a significant strain on school districts—especially those like ours, which is already at a massive disadvantage due to the state's unfair model for funding public schools that has existed since the early 90s.

Currently the state has approximately a seven BILLION dollar surplus that it could use to fund critical services like public education. This money does no one any good when it is sitting around untouched while our institutions are left to rot. Rep. Rodriguez and her peers would use this surplus as a reason to pass additional tax cuts that would exacerbate the already existing strain on public education (and other crucial services) and continue to starve the resources that make small communities like ours viable.

I work within the school district and have already seen the effects of the actual work being done by Rep. Rodriguez and those with whom she aligns. South Milwaukee High School continues to have to slash positions, which means major losses of opportunity for students in our schools. The state budget puts an especially difficult strain on services for students with special needs. Public schools are required by law to offer specific services, and the continued squeeze on funding that Rep. Rodriguez favors puts the district into the impossible position of providing these services and serving other students with less and less funding.

To sum this up, Representative Rodriguez and the Wisconsin state legislature have taken the path that many of their national counterparts have. They've turned educational funding into an ultra-political battleground to wage ideological war. The losers here: my kids, your kids, our teachers, our community. Everyone, really, except them.

Frankly, I am furious that our city found it reasonable and defensible to offer Representative Rodriguez this commendation for her work—work that has objectively HARMED our city and has served to further dismantle public education locally and statewide.

It reflects incredibly poorly on our city that we would allow ourselves to go unheard from our state representation for years, then literally give an award to that representation when she (for once) does the absolute bare minimum of her job, which is to advocate for people in the communities she represents.

Personally, I find no reason to be thankful for being tossed a few breadcrumbs when we are starving. The state budget spits in the face of our community and school district, and by endorsing Rep. Rodriguez's work, the city has spat in the face of our children and teachers (like myself). Here's reality: the real effect of Rep. Rodriguez's ongoing "work" is that small communities and their school districts will eventually become economically nonviable, and our only path to change is repeated referenda that put additional financial strain on our taxpayers.

South Milwaukee deserves better representation and leaders in the state level that actually care about supporting our schools, children, and community. It is with the utmost vigor that I object to being tacitly included in this proclamation and I completely disavow any association with it.

If you have any comments, questions, or concerns, email Alderman Backes at tbackes@smwi.org.