

## **Alderman Backes Update**

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I hope you all had a happy Thanksgiving weekend! The holiday season really crept up on me this year; as many of you know, I direct the theatre program at South Milwaukee High School, and with this year's fall play (our production of *Clue*) being a week later than usual, it meant running basically right up into Thanksgiving.

Needless to say, I am grateful to have had a bit of a break to recharge, and am looking forward to getting back at it to finish out 2023, both at school and at the city!

And at the city—hoo boy, there's a lot going on! This is, of course, budget season, and as always, our city is being asked to keep doing what we've been doing (or improving on what we've been doing) with less and less available. That means a whole lot of challenges with regard to determining which services to prioritize, and it's only going to get worse until things get figured out at the state level. And, as you well know if you've read my column regularly on this site, you know that I don't particularly have a whole lot of trust in work being done in good faith at the state level to provide real lasting aid to those who need it, both in terms of municipalities and school districts.

That being said, our city continues to do the best it can with the hand it's dealt, and we are very fortunate to have staff members who have been immensely responsible stewards of taxpayer money and who continue to deliver high caliber services despite having to get increasingly creative with the methods they must employ to do so.

The city council unanimously approved the coming year's budget at our meeting this past week, and now we move forward. As always, budget documents are available for public viewing online, and you can always reach out to your alderperson or to city staff with any questions you have about any of the items included in those documents.

## **One of the biggest upcoming challenges: lead water pipes**

There were a couple major items that were on our most recent agenda, and probably the most important decision we had to make was regarding lead water pipes.

The agenda item was a motion to create/amend city ordinances that would allow the city to compel homeowners with lead service lines to replace the portion of the lines on their property by a certain date.

This is, obviously, not an easy choice to make. There are several reasons why this is an issue now:

- Lead service lines are in focus all over the nation. Some cities have had very high-profile issues with excess lead in their drinking water, but it has become clear that lead service lines always have at least the potential to be dangerous to the health of humans and animals.
- There are currently around 1700 properties with lead service lines in the city. I'm the lucky owner of one of them.
- Replacement of these service lines is eligible (for a limited time) for funding through the Wisconsin DNR Safe Drinking Water Loan Program. Under this program, the city would receive loans (at 0.25% interest rate) to pay for the projects. Property owners would have 10 years to pay back a portion of the cost to the city, with those payments added to the affected homeowners' property tax bills each year for that 10-year period.
- The city also currently has American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding that could be devoted to the funding. However, this money must be allocated by the end of 2027 and expended soon thereafter. This, combined with the potential temporary nature of the DNR program, creates a bit of a ticking clock scenario.

This is where things get much more complicated, and I hope I do not bungle the explanation. But basically, the level of DNR funding depends on the census tract the homeowner resides in. These census tracts are not determined by the city; they're created higher up the chain. Some of these census tracts might be eligible for 25% coverage of the replacement. Others 50%, 75%, possibly even 100%.

With an ordinance now in place to be able to compel the replacement of lead service lines, the city's aim would be to use ARPA funds so that every homeowner with a lead service line, regardless of census tract, would have at least 50% of the payments they would owe covered.

During our meeting, the scenario provided was that at an average of \$5,000 cost to the homeowner for their portion of the lead service line replacement, the combination of DNR funding and supplementary ARPA funds would result in a \$2,500 max responsibility, with that 0.25% interest added. Paid off over 10 years, and that would be about \$250 per year.

(The \$5,000 figure was just an estimate; the projects would have to go out to bid like any other job around the city.)

HOWEVER, what we also learned was that tackling the census tracts in a specific order might result in other tracts getting more funding from the DNR if specific sections of the city are taken care of first. This would potentially create additional savings for affected homeowners.

Needless to say, this is all quite complex, and the last thing these 1,700 property owners (including me) want to hear is that they're soon going to be financially responsible for a portion of their lead service line replacement.

But this is the result of a national push for increased strictness regarding lead levels in drinking water. The EPA is set to lower the allowable amount of lead in drinking water, and we do not yet

know how low they're going to go. While South Milwaukee clears the currently set safety levels, we may or may not after that.

That uncertainty, combined with the availability of funding that we have right now, make this a project that will have to be done relatively quickly. If we don't act now, the problem is only going to get worse and significantly more expensive.

## Cool things happening around the city

Just wanted to give a quick shoutout to some cool things happening around the city:

- **Public art:** The murals we've seen going up are absolutely awesome. The mayor awarded special proclamations to several people involved in organizing local art, including the mural that just went up on the side of the Sorce Martial Arts building at 10th and Milwaukee. I'm looking forward to seeing even more art pop up around town!
- **Small business Saturday:** While I wasn't available to make it out for the Small Business Saturday world tour event that several business owners put together, I heard nothing but good things. A fair number of my favorite small businesses in the city were involved, which was awesome to see.
- **CLUE was a hit!:** Shameless plug #2 of the article for our SMHS theatre program! The fall play, *Clue*, was our best-selling fall production since I started directing the program in the fall of 2018, and the kids involved had an absolute blast. The work I get to do with the students in theatre gives me so much joy and this was one of the best groups of kids I've had the pleasure to work with. They care so much about art and performing and each other. What a treat.
- **Cops with a sense of humor:** My five-year-old recently learned about dialing 911 and what to do in certain emergencies at school. Well, my wife was showing him how he would dial 911 on a cell phone if he ever needed to... and he clicked the call button. She hung up immediately, but received a call from SMPD to verify that there was no emergency. SMPD policy is they'll send over officers no matter what. Charlie (my son) was terrified; he thought he was in huge trouble and that the police were going to think he was a "bad guy" and take him to jail. When the cops showed up, they had a great sense of humor about the whole thing, and were incredibly cool about it all. Charlie was relieved that he was not, in fact, going to be placed under arrest.
- **Great folks at SM Self Deposit:** It's a busy time of year for the folks at the self deposit station. When I went in today to take some leaves and yard waste, they were in great spirits despite the chilly weather and the large number of people they've likely had coming through. Our street department does great work all year long, and winter is always a challenge. Make sure to show them your appreciation.

That's all I've got for you today – I intend to write at least one more update before the holiday break. One month left of 2023; we've got this!

And PS: Check out the Christmas at the Commons event on Saturday afternoon at Bucyrus Commons! I'll be there with some costumed characters who will be more than happy to take photos with your kids.

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*If you have any comments, questions, or concerns, email Alderman Backes at [tbackes@smwi.org](mailto:tbackes@smwi.org).*