

Alderman Backes Update

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We're off and running here in 2024! It's always a bit of a slow start to the year coming out of the holiday in terms of business that comes across our agendas, but there are a few things that have arisen lately that are interesting or noteworthy.

Here's a brief rundown of some of the highlights.

Branding campaign

The city approved a branding campaign funded by Bucyrus Grant money that will include television commercials and various other marketing efforts. I can't speak much about the details, but there are some exciting elements that could have a transformative effect on the city, and I think it's going to be a lot of fun.

This was something that the Bucyrus Foundation wanted out of the millions of dollars gifted to the city and helps fit the vision of transforming the downtown and city by bringing more eyes to what we're doing and what we have to offer.

More to come on this in the future.

Capital borrowing and ARPA funding

Every other year the city puts forth a two-year borrowing plan for completing various projects around the city. With the financial challenges facing local municipalities like South Milwaukee, it is always difficult to strike a balance between being frugal and borrowing to cover necessary expenses.

Department heads put forth their requests for the next two years, and they did a really good job of outlining why those requests are necessary for their continued operations. The plan was eventually approved by both the Public Works and Public Property and Finance committees, and then by the Common Council this past week.

The city will be borrowing a couple million dollars less than we did for the last biennium.

We also provided guidance as a city to use American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) money to offset some of the city's borrowing needs. The city had \$800,000+ in unspent, undedicated ARPA money from the federal government that must be expended or committed by the end of 2024.

A significant portion of that money will be dedicated specifically to lead water line replacement. The joint committees (PWPP and finance) also heard various requests from department heads to use some of that money for other projects or initiatives.

The prevailing position at the committee level was that as much of the money as possible should be slated for must-haves. City staff was up front with the committees in that the department heads were told to be creative with their requests, and that some could certainly be categorized as “wants” rather than “needs.”

The committee did not end up moving forward with every request. Ultimately the decision was, with some potentially difficult decisions on the horizon with regard to funding and spending, that we should allocate as much as possible toward reducing our borrowing. Therefore, most of the remaining ARPA money was allocated toward the projects that were laid out in the capital borrowing schedule.

Election changes

The council reviewed a plan to make some changes to the electoral system beginning in the 2027 election. Currently all alderpersons are up for re-election at the same time every three years. The new plan would have those positions staggered, so four would be elected one year, four another year, and then there would be an off year.

This plan makes a lot of sense. It gives people more opportunities to make their voices heard about their elected officials, and it provides some degree of continuity so that incoming new alderpersons are able to learn from others around them.

I used the discussion of electoral changes as an opportunity to bring up something I am passionate about: term limits for elected officials. This is something that many people in the community I talk with favor—the idea that people should have a limit to the number of times they can run for a particular office. My feeling is that this helps create engagement and gives opportunities for more opinions to be heard, thus better representing the community.

I had a strong feeling this idea would be extraordinarily unpopular at the council level, and sure enough, the debate quickly turned heated and no vote was held. But it remains something I believe in; we are better at all levels of government when there is a more regular/frequent cycling of ideas. I have no problem continuing to bring these types of issues forward, even if I'll end up getting publicly grilled as a result.

Exciting things on the horizon

As we slowly creep toward spring, there are plenty of great things to look forward to around town.

It was so great to see the ribbon cutting ceremony for the Chi Shed on Milwaukee Ave! It's almost impossible with my work schedule to make it out for these types of events, but it was great to see the photos and to hear the excitement surrounding the new location for the

business. There have been a lot more ribbon cuttings these last few years than we'd had in many of the years before, and that pace continues to be swift.

There are also some big anniversaries for businesses coming up. Like hey, the folks at Bakehouse 23 (one of my personal favorite spots) just celebrated the first anniversary of opening their doors to the public!

There's a big block party coming up for Moran's Pub around St. Patty's Day—be sure to keep an eye out for that! It's certain to be a blast.

Really, there's an entire spring and summer's worth of events to look forward to around town, and with us having had a taste of good ol' "false spring" recently, I've been finding myself more frequently fantasizing about sitting on my back deck with a beverage and a book.

There's a similar feeling of anticipation around town; I talk to community members and business owners, and it just feels as though there's a lot of good stuff brewing all at the same time. I've been out on the re-election circuit talking to people around the district two neighborhoods, and I've also been having some good chats with business owners, and there's a lot of good energy. It just feels like this is going to be a big year for our city.

That's where I'll leave us for today—some positive energy for this mid-February day!

Here's to warmer, brighter days in the not-too-distant future.

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