

Alderman Backes Update

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Hello once again, South Milwaukee! I'm writing once again to provide you with a bit of an update on things happening at city hall after our most recent meeting, which was our first in several weeks due to the layout of the calendar.

The council meeting this week was relatively straightforward. No one showed up to speak at a public hearing at 6:15 about a re-zoning initiative for a property on the corner of College and 15th, where there is a proposed residential development or market-rate apartments. So that was quick and easy, and then we moved on to the council meeting at the normal time of 7 p.m.

Here's a quick overview of some of the points of interest from the agenda:

- The council approved a refund for overpayment of 2022 personal property taxes to U.S. Bank
- The council accepted several letters of resignation from city employees and made some edits to the operator schedules for a water/wastewater operator position
- The council approved the ordinance to amend the zoning code to allow for a residential planned development district at 100 15th Avenue
- The council approved a motion to enter into the Wisconsin-State Local Government Opioid Bankruptcy Memorandum of Understanding. The city of South Milwaukee has been one of very few municipalities in the state to receive money from a major opioid settlement because of the unique strategy we took in pursuing legal action.
- The council approved the designation of specific street addresses for several buildings within the Bucyrus campus.
- The council approved a new Civic Grants Commission, which will feature several residents and city officials who will oversee applications for Bucyrus grant money from local businesses and organizations.
- The council chose a design for signage that will be placed at Bucyrus Commons, opting for a design created by Michael's Signage.

Nothing really contentious or in need of significant discussion this week. The one issue that got the most discussion was the signage, simply because the council needed to talk through the options. Most of the other issues on the agenda were relatively straightforward.

It was cool to see a boy scout troop in the audience. The boys led us in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, and met with Mayor Shelenske afterward. We've occasionally had scouts in the audience before as they work toward certain merit badges that require attendance at local government meetings.

Reader questions

Something I wanted to start doing in this space was publicly answering some questions from readers or from folks on social media. I put out a post on my alderman Facebook page stating I'd be taking some questions, and did manage to get a couple.

Here they are!

"Will the city consider traffic calming measures on residential streets? Michigan Ave between 12th & 15th feels like a race track at times and Milwaukee Ave west of 13th is not pedestrian friendly. Also, there seems to be a lack of parking enforcement or guidelines. I often see large commercial vehicles parked too close to intersections blocking the sight lines when checking for cross traffic."

-Kevin Worm

In the Public Works/Public Property committee, we routinely see requests for additional traffic controls at intersections around the city. We had, at one point, had preliminary plans for the neighborhood east of 5th Avenue, between Marquette and Marion, as there were a lot of uncontrolled intersections over there.

I haven't seen anything specifically about the area you've mentioned come through, though it's certainly something we can look at. Part of the issue that would slow things down in looking at it is that right now our city is without a city engineer, so these requests would not be as streamlined as usual, and we aren't meeting as much as a committee. But for anyone who has an issue like this, you can always bring the request to your alderperson (or me) and we can take a closer look. Such changes to traffic controls would require a traffic study be done of the area to determine need and, if applicable, the type of control best suited for the area.

With regard to parking enforcement, I'd encourage you to contact the police department non-emergency line any time you believe there to be issues with vehicles parked illegally or dangerously.

"My one question I would like a better answer for is why South Milwaukee won't livestream the board meetings."

-Lucas Weiss

I actually brought this up at the last council meeting in January. My opinion is that the city can be more proactive with its messaging and its information about specifically what is being discussed at meetings. The official minutes don't really give you much, and the city itself doesn't have any kind of official blog. This is part of the reason why I started contributing to this blog, honestly; I felt like we could use some more direct insight from an elected official in particular.

I was told there are a couple primary barriers to any sort of livestream.

First, there's the legality issue. Not the question of whether it is legal to livestream, but what happens legally if the stream goes down and it's listed on the agenda, a legal public document, as being a livestreamed meeting. Do we have to shut down until the stream starts working again? How do we navigate that? It's a pretty sizable can of worms for a city that doesn't have a dedicated IT staff.

And that brings us to the second point. We do not have a dedicated IT staff that would be able to manage the stream during the meeting. This is different from the school district, which *does* have such a staff, and which is why they've been able to effectively stream their school board meetings. The school district also has livestream equipment that the city lacks. That staff, combined with that equipment, costs a lot of money.

Finally, there was a third issue that came up: there seemed to be pretty significant resistance from the council itself. At least, with regard to video streaming. Council members mentioned they did not want to be on video, or that there was targeted harassment toward them when they tried video streaming at one point.

What I do think would be at least one good solution would be to start recording meetings again so they can be placed online along with the minutes. As far as how that would work, that's an additional topic for discussion. Apparently during COVID, Assistant City Administrator Patrick Brever was taking the recordings just using his phone. Not exactly the most reliable or high-tech solution, but it was something.

So personally, I'd like to see at least an audio recording made readily available online for people who are interested in listening. It's just one more way to get the exact meeting contents out to people who can't make the evening meetings.

Ultimately, I think this only helps us to make sure accurate information is getting out, versus the stuff that gets garbled and misunderstood through certain online platforms. You're never going to completely solve the misinformation problem, but this is one thing that could potentially help.

Tim, I'd like to express my condolences at the passing of your wonderful father, David. His writing and love of wilderness, especially via his Sigurd Olson biography, means a lot to me. And I appreciated your written word in his memory. Hoping for your family's comfort.

-Betsy Abert

I really appreciated this message I received from Betsy on the post I made calling for questions for this blog. Some of my may have known my dad, David Backes, who passed away very unexpectedly on December 23 from an aortic aneurysm.

At one point, Erik Brooks had asked if I'd be willing to write some kind of tribute for him, but honestly, it's been hard to bring myself to do it; I've spent a lot of emotional energy on written

tributes to him already. But I do think it's worth telling the people of South Milwaukee who this man was.

My dad was a pretty incredible human being. A deacon in the Catholic church (including at Divine Mercy from 2005-2011), a thirty-year professor of journalism at UW-Milwaukee, a six-time published award-winning author and biographer, a sought-after speaker at conventions and events around the country related to nature and environmentalism, and so much more. If you didn't know him, you probably didn't realize we had someone of his stature living here in town. He shied away from the spotlight and was constantly humble.

More importantly, he was kind to everyone, and full of life and wisdom. He was so gentle, and yet so strong. There was a magnetism to him that captivated everyone he knew and drew people to him for advice and comfort. It is an unspeakably tremendous loss for us all.

I've been so grateful for everyone who has reached out in support. My dad grew up here in South Milwaukee and then lived most of his adult life here as well, raising four kids here. People should know just how much of a giant in his field and in his faith he was.

Those are all the questions I received this week. If you're interested in asking a question in the future, please feel free to email me at tbackes@smwi.org and I'll be happy to include your questions in a future blog.