

Alderman Backes Update

Published: June 6, 2024

This week was the highest-attended and most challenging common council meeting of my short time as an alderperson in the city of South Milwaukee. With two major issues on the agenda (the futures of the Grobschmidt Senior Center and the South Milwaukee Public Library), there were a lot of strong opinions and emotions that people came to express. I'm glad they did.

As you are well aware by now, we as the council made the difficult decision to permanently close the Senior Center, as well as to fund a study into options for the future of the South Milwaukee. I voted "aye" in both of these issues.

It is difficult to imagine the city's future without these institutions. Our financial realities, especially in the wake of a costly move to enhanced dispatch services with Oak Creek, made the senior center decision a necessary one. My hope is we are able to preserve the library for generations to come, as I believe it to be a part of our city's critical infrastructure in ways both tangible and intangible, but we are quite some time away from a decision on that issue as of yet.

During the council meeting, I spoke for some time about the "whys" that have led us to this point. Many people were shocked and outraged by the fact that these items would even be on the table. I can certainly understand the outrage and anger. But the shock—unfortunately, there's nothing surprising about this at all. These financial challenges have been decades in the making.

I wish I could say they were a result of the city's incompetence. At least that way there would be more control in our hands to make some more immediate and effective changes to the way we run things. But our city administration and staff have been incredible financial stewards. For years they have been managing to provide outstanding service despite having fewer and fewer financial resources available to them.

Unfortunately, we've run out of places to hide.

Municipalities and school districts alike are being starved to death by the Wisconsin state legislature. The revenue sharing models for municipalities and school districts alike are completely broken and inequitable, and the state legislature has completely shirked its responsibility to do anything about it.

For municipalities, the revenue sharing model is based heavily on new development and growth. For a landlocked community like South Milwaukee with extremely limited potential for this sort of growth, that locks our community out of some of the necessary state support to survive.

Meanwhile, levy limits currently have South Milwaukee only getting to add around \$20,000 per year to its budget, which is nowhere near enough to keep up with inflation.

So basically, the city's revenue sources are drying up, while expenses only continue to increase as a result of inflation. And this has been happening for decades. The time to pay the piper has finally arrived.

And it's only going to get worse. That is, unless the state attempts to do something about it.

This mirrors problems we're having nationwide. And I hesitate to get political as a mere alderperson, but I think it's important to develop a broader understanding of what has led us to this point.

More and more, our systems of government and our services are being funded on the backs of the middle and lower classes. From the end of the Great Depression until the 1980s, the top marginal tax rates for the nation's highest earners were never below 70 percent. Since the 1980s, they have hovered in the 30% range, and today stand at 37%, which would be among the lowest levels of the last century.

What does this mean? Well, basic math would tell you that massive cuts at top marginal levels to a specific demographic means their share of the tax base has gone way down, which in turn means that more of the proportional burden is being placed on those below them.

I'm not here to argue about taxation and whether you think it's right or not. But this is an undeniable fact: average Americans (and Wisconsinites) today are shouldering a much heavier burden in paying for these services than they have been historically. And this has been happening for about four decades.

We see the results now. Yes, the state is sitting on a massive surplus of money that could and should be used to provide more funding to municipalities or school districts to help them stay afloat. In that sense, we are facing way larger issues than what we can manage locally. But going beyond that, you can see how much the system is not working in favor of communities like ours.

Unfortunately, this means cuts will continue to happen. And just speaking for myself and no one else, I have significant concerns about the long-term viability of municipalities and school districts like ours. This has been going on long enough where this is a clear and deliberate effort to dry up established small communities in favor of other, more politically favorable locations.

I promise you, I feel the anger with you. I will be writing letters to various state representatives to encourage them to push for changes to revenue sharing models that are fairer for communities and school districts like what we have in South Milwaukee, and will be voting for people who are inclined to make the changes we need to survive.

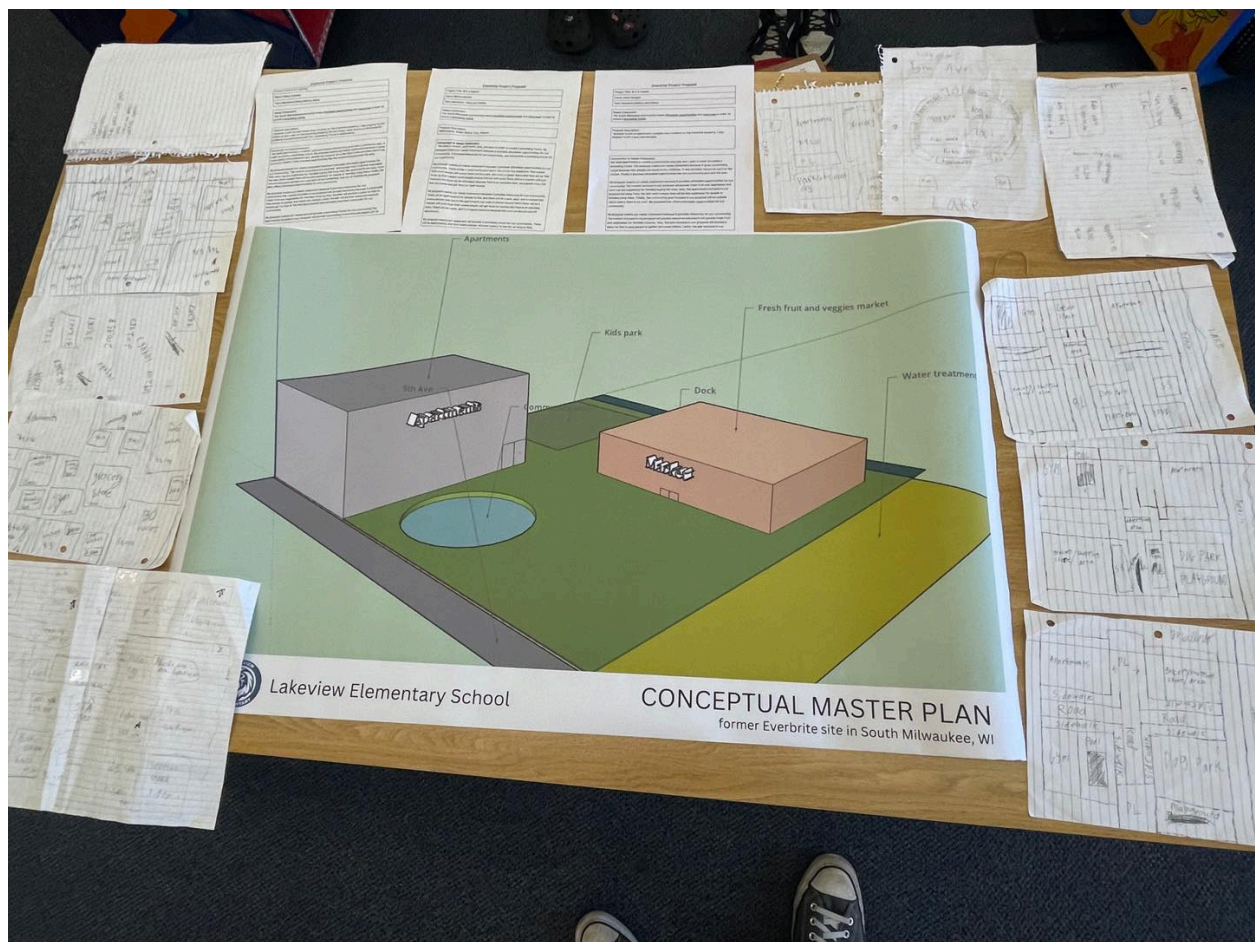
I would encourage you to do the same.

Lakeview Elementary's Everbrite project: what a success!

I had the opportunity to go and check out the Everbrite project showcase over at Lakeview Elementary this week, and it was SO cool. What a great idea by Mr. Sepersky, the principal, and outstanding execution by all the teachers, students, and other staff members who participated. There was a fantastic turnout of community members and city officials who came to see what the kids had been working on for a number of weeks.

Of course, I was partial to K5's model of their planned community and their drawings – my son was so excited to be working on it, and came home every day talking about his ideas.

I was especially impressed by the 5th grade's contributions. They were using Google SketchUp to create their site plans, so many of them had actual dimensions of the areas they were reserving for things like housing, retail, and various community amenities. They even had sketches that showcased their process and how they got to their final plans. See the below photo for an example!



This was an amazing collaboration among a number of entities to make this all happen. Well done to everyone involved!

Congratulations to the South Milwaukee Class of 2024!

As I write this, it's early in the morning on Thursday, June 6. Tonight the SMHS Class of 2024 will cross the stage and collect their diplomas before scattering into the world beyond to wherever life is taking them.

It's a privilege as an educator to get to see this tradition happen up close each year. Every class creates different memories and has a collection of students that you remember forever. Whether it's been in class, on the stage, or on the track, I've had so many opportunities to get to know this group of graduates and count myself very fortunate to have done so.

Congratulations to you all – go and make us proud!

That's all for today, folks. Get outside and enjoy the late spring air!

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