

Alderman Backes Update

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Welcome to spring and to the thick of election season! Just as the weather is beginning to warm up, there is also a lot of new stuff happening around the city of South Milwaukee.

I want to begin by giving a quick word of gratitude to everyone who came out and supported the South Milwaukee High School theatre production of *Chicago: Teen Edition* a couple weeks back. That show consumed my life for the first half of March, as tends to happen with musical season, and I enjoyed every single moment of it. I firmly believe it was the strongest production I've been involved with in my time directing the program, and I am so incredibly proud of all the students involved. It was a special group, and each kid was a joy to work with.

So once again, thank you to those of you who came to see it and who had such kind words to say!

With the busiest part of my year now in the rearview window, it's time to get caught up with my views on some of the things happening around South Milwaukee.

More development news: Bucyrus campus and 15th Ave.

Earlier this month there were a couple agenda items for some fairly significant projects happening around town.

Let's talk about the Scott Crawford development at the former Bucyrus campus first.

The development team came to the city to amend the established plans to allow for the addition of a school on the property and to change the location of the new construction from along the train tracks to in the large parking lot just off 10th Avenue. The school is Guidance Academy, which is the school housed at 1800 16th Avenue with Masjid Al-Huda mosque. This Islamic school has been a part of our community for some time and continues to see some substantial growth. The plan would be for the kindergarten through fifth grade portion of the school to now be located within the former Bucyrus campus.

There were some pros and cons to this idea. On the downside, it reduced the number of housing units that would be created as part of this redevelopment. That number of new housing units was one of the most appealing aspects of this project. While it will still be a large number of new units (well over 100, making it by far the largest new residential development in South Milwaukee in decades), it does represent a fairly significant reduction from the original plans first proposed several years ago.

This will also result in some additional considerations for city services and for traffic routing if there is going to be a school located within the development.

However, adding some mixed use to the site is also quite beneficial, and will ensure the site is activated throughout the day. Because many people who attend the school are coming from around the region, it also serves as another way to bring community visitors to our downtown area.

Because the school already exists within the community and is not in competition with our public school system, I ultimately supported this adjustment to the plans, as did the majority of the council.

There was also the latest approval for the project to transform 100 15th Avenue (corner of 15th and college) into 20 market-rate apartments. There have been several attempts to redevelop this property over the years, and now this will move forward. The former Lakeshore Clinic will get a big facelift, having sat vacant since 2018. The council approved a \$100,000 loan through the Bucyrus Foundation to help spur on the redevelopment, which is a project valued at \$3.2 million total. The property owners have until 2029 to repay the loan, and that money will go directly back into the Bucyrus Foundation money to be able to support additional future developments.

This is a great project for the city because it adds additional housing in a spot that has been underutilized for far too long. The rezone to residential just makes sense for the surrounding area. I'm looking forward to seeing the transformation!

Upcoming elections

We're just days away from the April 1 election. I'm writing this on Wednesday, March 26, so there is still an opportunity (at the time of my writing) to vote early at city hall. I did this yesterday, in fact. I was pleased to hear that there's already been a pretty significant turnout for a spring election in an odd year; about half of the absentee mail-in ballots that were sent out were already returned, and in total there were close to 1500 ballots already cast early, whether in person or mail in.

This is an especially important election for a number of reasons, with state supreme court of course being the one getting the most attention locally and nationwide.

On a more local level, we have elections for school board and municipal judge on the ballot.

I was pleased to have the opportunity to endorse and vote for my friend Bill Sakalaucks for school board. As a teacher himself in Racine, he understands the unique challenges and opportunities in public schools today from both the student and teacher perspective, and he will be a committed advocate for our students and district. South Milwaukee needs board members who will push for our needs at the state level while also advocating for those who attend, work in, or have children in our schools. Bill is a strong candidate on all of those fronts, one who I know will be passionate about the work involved in the position.

If you have not already voted, please make plans to do so on April 1; it is a critical election for so many reasons.

By the way, I want to give a huge shoutout to everyone who is doing the work to get the word out about these local candidates especially. Erik does a great service to the community with the coverage he gives for each candidate on this blog, and by all accounts, the Strong Towns candidate forum at the library was a big success and had great feedback (I was bummed to not be able to make it, but you know, musical tech week and all that). It used to be nearly impossible to find good information about local candidates, but of late it has gotten much easier, and a lot of work goes into that!

Going along with that, a shoutout as well to a new Facebook group for discussions about things happening around the city; the [South Milwaukee Town Square](#) group run by Laura Maass has been a great resource for hearing about or even directly from candidates while avoiding some of the negativity that often crowds online spaces. I've been enjoying seeing positive community engagement on that platform.

Summer is coming...

Okay, so it doesn't exactly feel summery yet, but South Milwaukee Downtown Market recently announced its lineup for the summer, and it even [got coverage](#) in one of my favorite digital Milwaukee publications, *Milwaukee Record!*

Ivy Ford and Sweet Sheiks are a couple of my personal favorite regular performers here, and I've seen the Whiskeybelles a couple times as well—they're great. But there is a lot of good stuff throughout the summer planned, and I'm looking forward to bringing my kids back to the market once again on Thursdays!

In addition, the lineup for Crusherfest 2025 continues to grow more impressive. As you likely were unaware, I grew up a big professional wrestling fan, so seeing some of the names the committee has lined up to appear makes me geek out a little bit. The most recent announcements included the likes of Tommy Dreamer, a hardcore legend who was one of my favorites from ECW and then the Invasion storyline in the WWF. I'm also excited in particular for Tito Santana and Jimmy Hart!

There are still several more talent announcements coming, so I'm very much looking forward to seeing what else the committee has planned. Crusherfest runs May 31 and June 1.

Water pipe work still in progress

If you live in the second district (or in the southern edge of the first district) you've probably been seeing and hearing a lot of commotion lately with heavy machinery and equipment. The city's

ongoing lead pipe replacement project remains in full swing, and I have to say I've been incredibly impressed by the efficiency of the work.

My street was one of the ones most recently done, and when I talked to the workers, they mentioned they were hitting nine or 10 homes per day—and that's just their crew. There are multiple contractors/crews working on this job around the city right now.

By the time this work is finished, there will be no more lead water lines in South Milwaukee, bringing us into compliance with new federal guidance. As I've mentioned before, water/wastewater superintendent Ben Huffman deserves a tremendous amount of credit for finding the most cost-effective ways to complete this necessary work, earning grants from several sources to greatly reduce taxpayer burden. This is one of those projects that, while not "sexy" so to speak, is going to be crucial for the long-term health of our city.

Street paving work and sidewalk repair will follow after the water crews move on; the water line crews have been brought in based partially on which roads were already scheduled to be replaced to maximize efficiency. So not only are there going to be a lot of fresh water lines, but there will also be some smooth looking roads coming soon!

Let's talk!

It's been a bit since I put this open invitation out there, but here it is again!

Want to talk about anything related to the city? Got some ideas you'd like to float, concerns you have, or anything along those lines? Whether you're in my district or not, I'd love to get together and talk with you. Feel free to reach out to me at my city email, tbackes@smwi.org, and let's talk.

I ran for this position because I want to meet people and help them out while also having some small part in positioning this city for future success. I've met a whole lot of folks over the last several years I may never have otherwise.

Hope to hear from you!

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