



Park People News

Creating Citizen Connections to Our Parks

2012 Milwaukee County Parks Budget Issue - Fall 2011

On Thursday September 29th County Executive Abele released his proposed 2012 Milwaukee County budget. "As I developed this budget, everything was on the table except a property tax increase and a fixed-route bus fare hike," Abele said during his presentation to the County Board of Supervisors.

Prior to his release of the budget it was generally assumed that Abele would be kind to the Parks Department in regard to their precarious financial position in the wake of the previous County Exec's seemingly endless downsizing of our storied park system and Abele's well stated respect and admiration for Parks Director Sue Black. In addition, Sue Black had recently turned down a highly coveted job leading the Chicago Parks District to stay with Milwaukee County and many assumed that Abele would reward Black giving her a budget devoid of any cuts. Not so. As it turns out, Abele has proposed a 3.7 million dollar (14%) reduction in property tax funding for our parks in 2012 which lends credence to the old adage "the more things change, the more they stay the same".

Abele's proposed reduction in property tax support of the parks is made up of true budget cuts and an increase in expected revenue. The cuts again center on costs related to park personnel which total over 2.2 million dollars.

Extremely troubling is a 30% reduction in seasonal employee staffing (\$1,000,000) and the elimination of 15 of the remaining 46 full time front-line Park Maintenance Workers (\$470,000). All staffing reductions come at the cost of front line positions that provide the end product: safe, clean and presentable parks. The remaining cuts, unrelated to personnel, are in the utility budgets (gas and electric) which total a little over \$700,000.

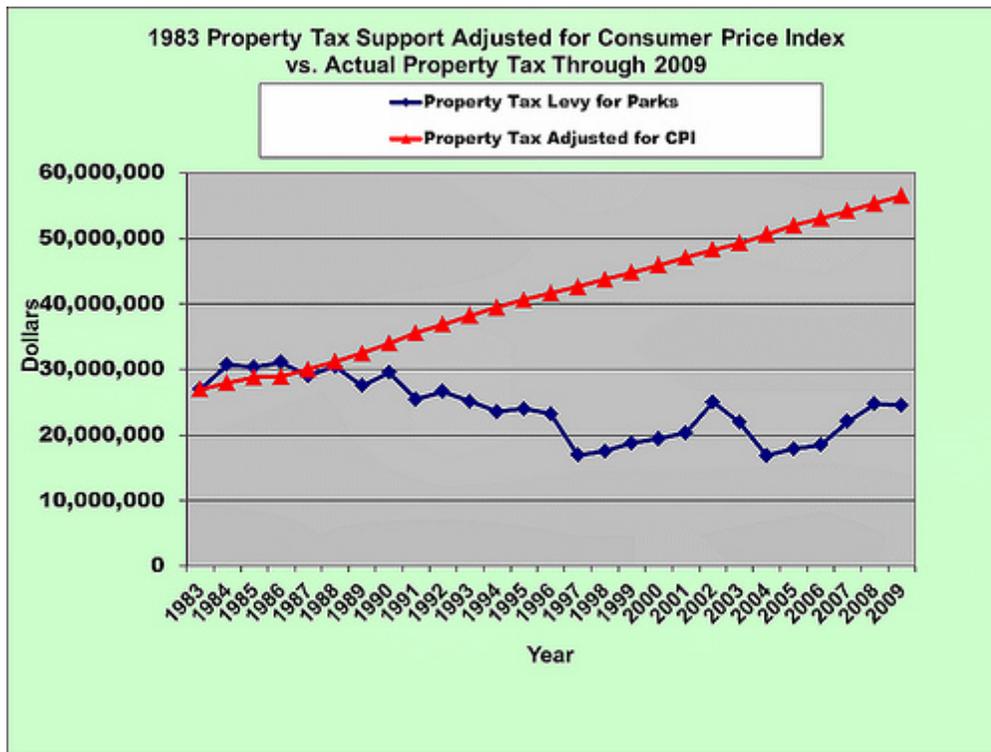
The 2012 revenue goal is troubling as well with a total increase of \$850,000 for a department that already has an unobtainable revenue target of \$17.5 million dollars. The average revenue actually generated by the parks over the last three years is approximately \$16.5 million. To make budget every one of the last few years the parks department has internally substituted cuts in staffing levels totaling \$1 million dollars to bridge the gap between budgeted revenue and actual revenue.

At this point in the County budgeting process the ball is in the court of the County Board of Supervisors. The Supervisors have until the first week in November to edit the County Exec's budget in a way that they find appealing. In the past we could count on the Board to reverse many of the County Exec's proposed cuts in park funding. However, with an election coming up next April for many current Supervisors and significant funding needs in other County service entities such as Transit and Social Services, it is unlikely that there will be any significant budgetary relief offered by the Board to reverse Abele's most egregious park budget reduction proposals for next year. Of course that does not mean that we, as park loving citizens, shouldn't try to inject our will into the process. If you want to let your elected officials know

what you think about further reductions for our parks you should write or call your County Board Supervisor. Here is a link to get information as to who serves you and how to contact them:

<http://county.milwaukee.gov/FindSupervisor>

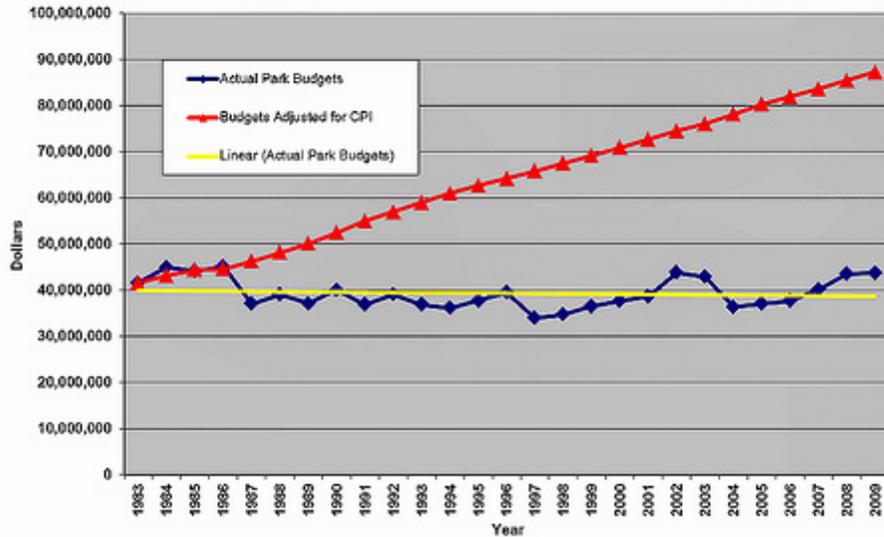
It has been obvious to The Park People organization for many years that Milwaukee County, with its myriad economic problems, cannot continue to be counted on to keep our parks viable for the future. Each and every year there seems to be an insurmountable deficit facing Milwaukee County that ultimately affects the Parks Department budget. As a matter of fact, there has been a constant erosion of park funding going on for more than twenty five years. The chart below shows in gory detail how property tax funding for our Park System has shriveled over the years. The property tax for park operations in 1986 (the high water mark for property tax funding) was actually over 5 million dollars more than that provided in 2009. If one were to factor in inflation over that time period the loss of funding is staggering with a gap of approximately 30 million dollars when adjusted for the consumer price index for that period.



One of the major ramifications of this gap in funding is the loss of front line workers. In 1986 there were 760 full time park employees. Today there are approximately 210 and less than half of those are the people working in the field providing the end product.

The Park Department budget which is its actual spending authority, is made up of not only property tax funding, but revenue as well. Proceeds from golf courses, marina operations, parking at O'Donnell Park, athletics, building rental fees, picnics, etc., also contribute to the parks spending authority. The chart below displays total park funding from 1983 to 2009

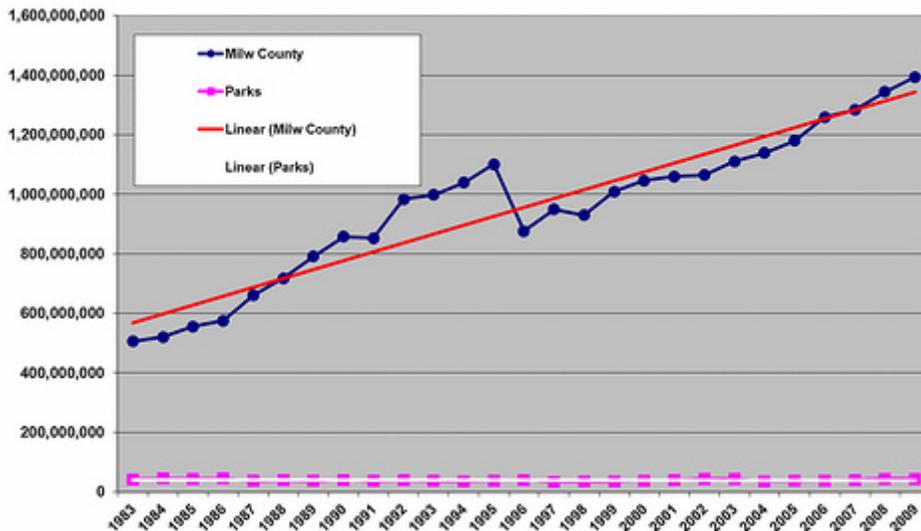
Actual Park Budgets 1983 through 2009 vs. Budgets adjusted for CPI



If the Park Department budget had remained whole during this period the spending authority would be approximately 88 million dollars in 2009, about twice as much as it actually was, again, shining a light on the County's ability (or intent) to properly fund our parks.

If the County budget as a whole had remained mired in the same malaise as the Park Department budget over time one could understand the park system funding deficit. That unfortunately, is not true. Since 1983 the County budget has almost tripled while Park Department funding has basically remained the same.

Park Budget Comparison to the Overall County Budget (1983 – 2009)



The whole conundrum of Milwaukee County's handling of park funding over time can be generally summarized as a mishandling. Is this really what we, as citizens entrusted with a critical civic asset, would have preferred? Our guess would be no.

The time has come to take matters in hand and work together to secure a sustainable and responsible funding source for our parks, to do that we need the assistance of the State Legislature. The County is basically a ward of the State and the changes necessary to secure park funding has to come through legislation that the State could provide.

One method that had the support of a few State Legislators two years ago was a half percent raise in the County sales and use tax. A bill was drafted that would allow the increase but did not advance because the majority leaders in both the Senate and Assembly blocked a floor discussion that would have been put forward for a vote. It seems that the majority leaders did not want to allow their fellow legislators to vote on a tax increase even though a Milwaukee County advisory referendum to do such had passed in November of 2008.

In 2007 a bill that would have allowed the creation of Park Districts in Wisconsin did not get a committee assignment in the legislature, a sure fire way to kill a bill. If a Park District was created in Milwaukee County the park system would be transferred away from Milwaukee County and placed under an elected, volunteer board of directors. The ability to levy a tax for park purposes would as well be transferred from the County to the elected Park System Board of Directors. Under this scenario the County would have to reduce its property tax levy by an amount equal to the Park District levy. In essence, there would be no immediate increase in taxes for the citizens of Milwaukee County. This would not provide more dollars for park maintenance but it would stabilize funding for our Park System as it would no longer have to compete with other Milwaukee County Departments for precious tax dollars in subsequent years.

It is likely that other park funding scenarios are possible. The problem is that there is currently no public discussion of these alternatives.

Maybe the 2012 park budget, once it manifests itself in even poorer care and maintenance of our parks will foster that discussion.