



Socialist Party Of Milwaukee

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How To Govern Milwaukee County

There has been a big push to “reform” Milwaukee County’s government. The business community is generating (and funding) most of the reform suggestions. The reforms are being justified in the name of efficiency by calling for the cutting of waste, thus promising to save tax dollars.

Some of the reforms have been implemented. But there is little evidence of improved services or the reduction of waste. There is evidence (if we look at many of Milwaukee’s parks) that we are seeing a deterioration of public services. County officials appear to be fearful of facing the public, as one finds public access to many buildings and offices becoming more difficult and limited.

FUNCTIONS OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT: Milwaukee County is responsible for operating and maintaining the County Park System (at one time the envy of the nation), maintaining a transportation system (which includes buses, freeways, county roads and the airport), managing the criminal justice and civil court system (this includes jails, the sheriff’s department, the district attorney, housing courts for both criminal and civil disputes), record keeping (births, deaths, property transactions, etc.), welfare and health services, economic and business development, intergovernmental coordination, culture and education (the federated Library system, UW-County Extension Services, Historical Society, and museums), and the County Elections Commission.

CURRENT GOVERNING STRUCTURE: The County is governed by the following elected officials; A County Executive, Register of Deeds, County Clerk, Clerk of Courts, Treasurer, Sheriff, District Attorney, and a Board of Supervisors (currently 18 members serving 4 year terms). Additionally there are judges who are elected to 6-year terms (the number of judges and their salaries are paid and determined by the Wisconsin State Legislature). There have been actions in recent years to reduce the number of supervisors and to reduce the supervisors’ full-time pay to part-time salaries. The Wisconsin Legislature has been reducing the power of the Milwaukee County Board.

CURRENT REFORM EFFORTS: As noted the size of the County Board have been cut with continued pressure to further reduce the number of supervisors. The Supervisor’s pay has been lowered from a family-supporting level to one that is aimed to be that of a part-time worker. There was an advisory referendum on enabling the electorate to eliminate the elected County Executive, and allowing of replacement by an appointed County Administrator, who would be directly answerable to the Board of Supervisors (a majority of voters disapproved of changing the state laws to allow Milwaukee County to opt for such a change). There has been a long-standing call for the elimination of the elected administrators (especially the Register of Deeds, County Clerk, Clerk of Courts, and Treasurer).

[OVER]

Position Paper of the Socialist Party of Milwaukee

BLUEPRINT FOR A MORE RESPONSIVE AND EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT: The following is a blueprint offered by the Socialist Party of Greater Milwaukee for reforming Milwaukee County Government. The purpose is to restore democratic institutions and accountability of Milwaukee County decision-makers. To that end we need to:

1. **Increase the size of the County Board.** More Supervisors makes it easier for the public to know and to access their supervisors. An added benefit is that it would make elections less costly for candidates, therefore reducing the influence of money in the political process.
2. **Replace single-member supervisory districts and the practice of winner-take-all politics.** Replace the winner-take-all system with a system of proportional representation. When implementing proportional representation, it is recommended that either a **party-list system or a cumulative voting system** be implemented. A **party-list system** encourages voters to choose policies and programs that they believe are best. Such a system would de-emphasize the “horse-race” mentality in which voter perceptions of personalities take precedence over what policies a candidate may favor. A **cumulative voting system** would allow non-partisan elections to continue as each voter would be given a set number of votes to be distributed among several candidates or allocated to one or a smaller number of candidates. Such a system provides minority groups an opportunity to have a voice in government, while maintaining majority rule. **Cumulative voting** has successfully been used to implement Voting Rights laws..
3. **Place administrative tasks in the hands of professionals.** Eliminate the elected administrators by replacing them with administrators responsible to the County Board. This will provide better accountability with a clear line of command by a democratized County Board of Supervisors.
4. **Eliminate the elected position of County Executive** and place the administration in the hands of a County Administrator appointed, and answerable to the County Board.
5. **County Board pay should be set at a family supporting level and encourage dedication to citizens.** Low-pay often becomes a breeding ground for corruption.

FUTURE FUNCTIONS OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT: Many of the functions of county government are mandated by the State of Wisconsin. Some of the functions, such as the Sheriff’s Department or road maintenance, may overlap with services provided by municipal governments. Some services may be best provided by local governments, others may be best provided by the county. Milwaukee County, being a larger entity than municipal governments, has a better tax base to support government functions. Currently, the County sponsors the Intergovernmental Cooperation Council that includes both County government and the local governments operating within the county. The Council provides a forum for the sharing of ideas and raising concerns. This would be a solid starting point for evaluating public services in Milwaukee County and determining the best provider(s).

The above proposal was adopted at the September 5, 2015 meeting of the Socialist Party of Metropolitan Milwaukee, the Party of good government under the Milwaukee Mayoralities of Emil Seidel, Daniel Hoan and Frank Zeidler.

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