

A Letter to State Legislative Representatives of Juneau County

Dear Senator Marklein and Assemblyman Kurtz,

A recent discussion with Juneau County Supervisor members has provided an improved understanding of the budgetary crisis that face local governments in the State of Wisconsin. Summarily it comes down to costs rising while revenue has been flat.

Current wage structures have made it difficult to hire and retain staff in positions quite critical to the citizens of Juneau County. Most recognize government's role in the provision of police, ambulance, and fire department services. Less obvious are the difficulties in finding candidates to fill 911 call centers. Social Services are in a similar predicament. Emergency government managers are clear that staff will leave to other opportunities for pay commensurate with their training and experience.

Replacement of equipment needed for road maintenance, emergency vehicles, computers and supplies to run offices is further challenged by inflation. Decisions to defer scheduled replacement of vehicles has contributed to unsafe conditions for county employees. Frequent unanticipated repairs add to expense and inefficiency.

The needs for attention to the citizens of the county do not go away and many of these needs cannot be ignored. A child or elder who is abused or neglected are issues that falls to local government at any hour or day. Citizens struggling with mental illness bring their crisis to local emergency rooms and it now ultimately it comes to local government to help in resolution. Costs of operating a jail are high. Extreme weather events must be managed and prepared for. Unsafe contaminants in water are relatively new issues where, again, local government is expected to respond.

In 2010 the State Legislature replied to budget shortfalls by passage of Act 10 which cut some portion of the obligation of local governments to cover insurance and retirement programs for employees. But even these contracted costs have not been stable and will continue to rise under the influence of inflation.

Tax levy by local government is a dizzying regulatory process influenced by property value and mill rates. Property values rise, while mill rates drop. The effect is the tax levy remains flat. Only new construction within the counties will allow for expansion of the levy. Juneau County is one of many that has not experienced growth sufficient to cover government operating costs. Only a few counties designated as tourism counties are allowed to issue a resort sales tax. All of this is under the regulatory oversight of the State Legislature.

Your attention and action are needed. Juneau County borrowed money to meet end of year shortfalls for the 2022 and 2023 budgets. While the budget process does not begin until later this year, the prospect of needing to borrow money again is real. This cannot go on.

We hear of surplus in the coffers of the state, yet local governance is strapped in circumstances that are under the regulatory influence of you, our elected state legislature officials.

While no one is thrilled to pay taxes, we also expect order and safety from government. Your response is what citizens watch for and expect.

