

Walker GOP Milwaukee County Bill Is An Outright Attack On Local Control

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MADISON - Earlier this week, the Senate and Assembly passed legislation, Assembly Bill 85, that is an outright attack on local control. This is only the most recent in a series of Republican-sponsored legislative attacks on their political enemies. This time, the victim is local government in Milwaukee. This big government move mandates the micromanagement of local government in our community, and leaves us wondering: who is next?

Below are just some of the concerning provisions contained in this bill, which has now been sent to the governor for his signature:

1. Cut the county board budget to 0.4% of the property tax levy immediately upon passage of the bill, which equals an 85% budget reduction after paying existing commitments
2. Transfer authorities away from the county board and department heads to the county executive
3. Grant additional authorities to the county executive to prevent supervisors from working too closely with department personnel
4. Reduce term length from four years to two years
5. Change contract negotiation, signing of contracts, consolidation of service agreement processes, and administration and management of certain departments
6. Limit supervisors' salaries to median income and the prevent them from obtaining health care coverage and pension benefits
7. Reduce salary and benefits of supervisors in 2016 regardless of the outcome of the 2014 binding referendum
8. Limit the referendum in April 2014 to only asking about possible pay and benefit reduction of supervisors, not the other provisions of the bill



[Click here to watch the floor debate on AB 85 on WisconsinEye.](#)

How the Milwaukee County Board Compares

The Milwaukee County Board is comprised of 18 supervisors, each representing between 50,000 and 55,000 neighbors, which is the same size as most State Assembly districts. Additionally, the County Board employs about 38 full-time staff members, including constituent service professionals, committee clerks, auditors, and budget analysts. Having a board and professional staff of that size allows supervisors to remain informed about county issues, be responsive to neighbors' concerns, and provide legislative oversight of the county executive and sheriff.

Furthermore, the proposed cut raises fundamental issues about maintaining a system of checks and balances in local government, and whether the Wisconsin State Legislature should have the authority to intervene in what is clearly an issue of local control. Although groups supporting the severe restrictions argue that no other Wisconsin county has a supervisory board comparable to Milwaukee, we must also remember that no other county in our state has such an economically and ethnically diverse population of nearly 1 million people, or more than one-sixth of the state's total population. Additionally, the Milwaukee Supervisory Board oversees a \$1 billion dollar budget, and is responsible for oversight of a regional airport, county zoo, and county-funded mental health complex.

Critics of the current full-time board have compared the current structure of 18 supervisors and an annual salary of about \$50,000 to the salary and structure of the Board in 1970. What critics have failed to mention, however, is that the Board in 1970 had 25 members, who were each paid a salary of \$68,000 (when adjusted for inflation).

Watering Down Our Checks and Balances

While this bill makes enormous changes to the Milwaukee County Board, it leaves the County Executive Office completely untouched. With the long history of Milwaukee County Executives abusing their power, this proposal sets us on a dangerous course in the wrong direction. Milwaukee County has seen past executives, as recently as 2006, attempt to sell off our valued and profitable state assets, which include the Milwaukee County Airport, the Milwaukee County Zoo, and even our neighborhood parks.

By preventing the board from continuing its watchdog role of the county executive, he will now have the ability to continue where others left off with regards to selling our assets. Hopefully the people of Milwaukee county will see past the smoke and mirrors and realize that this bill is less about supervisor salaries and more about hampering oversight and removing the necessary checks and balances in local government to concentrate power in the County Executive Office.

Ignoring the People of Milwaukee County

In addition to circumventing Milwaukee County's local leaders, Assembly Bill 85 also ignores the wishes of the people residing in the county who are directly supporting the board. The Milwaukee County Board is an elected body and if Milwaukee County residents have a problem with their representation, it is their right to make their voice heard to promote change.

Further, while this bill allows Milwaukee County residents to vote in a referendum regarding the pay of county board supervisors, that is the only provision of the passed bill that residents will be able to vote on. They will not be able to vote on increasing the power of the county executive, decreasing the budget for the board overall, or reducing term lengths by two years.

Additionally, rather than putting the limited referendum to a vote during a major election, Republicans chose April 2014, an election where not all municipalities will even have major races and thus have significantly lower voter turnout. The main proponents of this legislation is an out-of-county special interest group, the county executive, and former supervisors that will not be affected by the changes. Clearly the residents of Milwaukee County were not the main consideration for furthering this bill.

Republicans Continue Their Attack on Milwaukee

This bill continues what we have already seen: a calculated attack on the city and county of Milwaukee. This attack has become so brazen that a recent Milwaukee Journal Sentinel headline even asked: "Is the GOP-run state Legislature at war with Milwaukee?" Considering the proposals introduced this session, the answer appears to be yes.

In addition to passing this anti-local control measure against Milwaukee County, while leaving other counties untouched, for now, legislative Republicans have also pursued legislation or proposals to:

1. Kill the Milwaukee street car project
2. Revoke residency requirements for local employees
3. Expand vouchers while refusing to give public school children a single additional dollar in the classrooms

What Republicans seem to be forgetting is that city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County play a pivotal role in the overall economic success of our state. In reality, as goes Milwaukee, so goes the rest of the state. Instead of continuing an unfair attack on our only world-class city, Republicans should be focusing on how to better support this economic engine.

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