

Mayor's Column for February 23, 2011 Review

The political events that began last week in Madison and around Wisconsin are unsettling. It is important to clarify the fiscal status of our city in view of the state-wide public debate and conversation that is ongoing.

The municipal government of the City of Evansville is financially strong. We have been budgeting frugally through this recession and have balanced our recent budgets with no increase in the tax rate. (The last tax rate increase was for the dredging of Lake Leota, following an advisory referendum showing strong public support.) We have made decisions to delay purchases of computers and put off new vehicle purchases. We have cut part-time staff positions and reduced office supply expenses.

The city has a healthy fund balance, according to our financial advisors and city auditors, and has stayed within conservative guidelines for municipal debt capacity. We are in good fiscal shape while enjoying recent community improvements, like the restoration of Lake Leota, the reconstruction of Main Street, hundreds of new LED street lights, and an updated waste water treatment plant.

Our citizens are investing in our future, committing over \$3 million in private money for Creekside Place, the community/senior center under construction on Maple Street. Businesses have recently made investments in our community, including the Heights at Evansville Manor and several restorations/renovations in our downtown. I am optimistic that there will be additional local business investments this year.

I have heard suggestions that Evansville ought to sell its water and light utility, city-owned for over 100 years, to solve our "financial problems." Selling our snow plows has also been suggested. **We do not need to sell off valuable city assets; we are not in financial trouble.** We just need to go forward continuing to budget to our means, even if it is difficult with impending cuts in shared revenue. The result will be continued fiscal strength for our city.

Municipal labor costs are over half of our budget, as is typical of local government. In view of current events, here are relevant Evansville facts:

- As previously mentioned, we have reduced part-time employees to reduce expenses.
- City employees have paid 10% of health insurance premiums for years.
- Department heads are in the second year of a 0% salary increase.
- On the agenda of this week's Common Council meeting is approval of a 3-year contract with the police officer union. It includes phasing in of employee retirement contributions to 3% (the state budget repair bill exempts police from proposed collective bargaining provisions, including employee retirement contributions and limits on wage

increases), no wage increase for 2011, and small cost of living increases for 2012 and 2013 that are most certain to be below the consumer price index (again, police are exempt from the proposed collective bargaining component of the state budget repair bill). The Evansville police voiced their decision to be part of the fiscal solution to imminent cuts in local government shared revenue. They also indicated that they were interested in sharing necessary financial “pain,” rather than seeing local layoffs. I applaud our police officers for their commitment.

- The city has been negotiating a new contract for the majority of city employees since last fall. Another negotiating session is scheduled for Tuesday of this week.

Three of my observations relating to the Wisconsin budget repair bill that is under consideration:

1. Repeated statements that the public employee union components in the bill provide flexibility to local governments are questionable and disregard differences in the hundreds of Wisconsin local governments. Specific requirements for line items in local budgets, such as caps on wage increases and defined employee deductions for retirement diminish local control and flexibility. Municipalities should decide where budget reductions are appropriate.

An approved amendment to the budget repair bill would require establishment of a local grievance board and state-specified grievance procedures to offset collective bargaining components of the repair bill. Local governments are striving to operate lean; new mandates, with required rules and procedures, are most assuredly unfunded and do not make for smaller local government.

2. The components of the budget repair bill, including the collective bargaining items, have been promoted as minor and modest. The bill is neither minor nor modest. Regardless of individual political ideology, there are significant policy issues included in this legislation. I encourage everyone to read the bill, all 144 pages. It can be found at <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/JR1SB-11.pdf>.
3. I have been appalled by some of the recent rhetoric, not even touching on the “talk media.” I saw a television interview of a state legislator on Sunday morning who spoke of leaving Madison for the weekend to go home to the “real people,” implying that citizens exercising their rights of speech and assembly are not. Public employees have been referred to as “free-loaders;” state employees taking furloughs for the second year would disagree. A private school teacher stated that public school teachers only care about benefits while she teaches because she cares about her students. Evansville teachers instructing and caring for our children would certainly be incensed by this view.

Public employees are friends, neighbors, and relatives. They are taxpayers. They care about their work as teachers, nurses, social workers, police officers, firefighters, EMTs,

clerks, utility linemen, plow drivers, and so on. Public employees did not cause our current financial problems. Decades of political decision-making (or not) at all levels of government got us where we are today.

I have been honored to work with City of Evansville employees. I have watched them restore electricity during stormy weather. I have watched them respond to citizens in need day and night. I have watched them repair water main breaks in subzero weather. They contribute to making Evansville a special hometown. I am proud of their efforts.

Businesses, private employees, public employees, including government officials, everyone needs to contribute to government budget solutions, from the national level to the local level. Name calling, fingerpointing, and scapegoating are counterproductive and senseless. We need to get to work—collaboration and cooperation from all involved is required ASAP.

As always, I can be reached at City Hall, 882-2266. My e-mail is sandy.decker@ci.evansville.wi.gov.

Community Announcements

The Evansville Lions Club Annual Pancake Breakfast in support of Boy Scout Troop 514 will be held from 7:00 a.m. to noon on Sunday, March 6, at the Grove Campus Cafeteria, 401 South Third Street.

The FFA and FFA Alumni Farm Toy Show will be held on Sunday, March 6, at the Evansville Field House, 401 South Third Street. The hours are 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

BASE, Building A Safer Evansville, will hold a community supper and discussion on underage drinking and prescription drug abuse on Monday, March 7, 2010, from 6:15-7:45 p.m. at the Evansville Youth Center, 209 South First Street.

The Evansville Farmer's Market will hold a vendor information meeting at 6:30 p.m. on March 10 at the United Methodist Church, 21 South Madison Street.

Community Congratulations/Thanks

Our community thanks the hundreds of citizens that attended the Evansville Fund Chocolate Extravaganza. The Evansville Fund financially supports many worthy local projects.

Congratulations to the Law Dogs, including Evansville Police Department employees Patrick Reese, Matthew Nankee, Chris Jones, Jeremy Job, and Jill Puckett for their participation in the Special Olympics Polar Plunge last weekend! The team raised over \$1250 for the Special Olympics program.

