*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**Fiscal hurdles mount for Milwaukee County Parks**

Growing constraints on property tax resources continue to pose fiscal challenges for Milwaukee County Parks while also requiring greater reliability on revenues from fees, permits, and food and beverage sales.

This change in the parks’ revenue mix creates a new set of policy questions for county leaders. But helpful insights may come from examining models in peer communities such as Minneapolis, Cleveland, Seattle, Madison and Dane County, and Sonoma County, CA.

An array of financial challenges facing the Milwaukee County Parks have been well-documented, yet the parks’ unmet operating and capital needs continue to grow. To address this, the Milwaukee County Parks commissioned the Wisconsin Policy Forum to conduct a research and facilitation project that would consider options for a sustainable financial path forward.

The report notes that many potential solutions would require state approval and these measures continue to warrant consideration in Madison. It also suggests, however, that Milwaukee County leaders and parks stakeholders consider steps the county can implement independently in the near term, “including the potential for new partnerships with other public sector or nonprofit entities.”

The report’s financial analysis shows how the department’s revenue mix has changed over the years to become increasingly reliant on earned revenues such as those generated from permits, admissions fees, food and beverage sales, and rentals. Among the questions this raises is whether dual goals of maximizing earned revenue while maintaining robust and equitable public access to parks can successfully co-exist.

In addition to solutions that would require state approval — such as creating a dedicated property or sales tax for parks — some options enacted by peer park systems might be accomplished locally. These include building on existing partnerships with the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District to possibly share maintenance and environmental protection responsibilities for certain parks; new partnerships with school recreation departments or nonprofit groups to enhance programming or services.

Additional options include creating an enterprise fund that segregates revenue-generating parks amenities and requires them to pay for themselves; segregating regional attractions, such as Boerner Botanical Gardens or the Domes, and financing them separately from parks; or carving out a larger role for municipal governments within Milwaukee County for maintaining county-owned parks in their communities.

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