



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE
Milwaukee County
CHRIS ABELE • COUNTY EXECUTIVE

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During the County Board's July 2013 meeting, 31 files were passed. I have signed all but this resolution, which I cannot sign in good conscience, as it puts Milwaukee County on a less sustainable path and unnecessarily spends tax dollars. However, in the interest of moving forward, I am returning it unsigned and will take this opportunity to reiterate my concerns.

Two years ago, the board unanimously agreed with the recommendations in a sustainability audit of the County cultural facilities. That audit rightly called for the War Memorial, Art Museum, and other County-supported cultural institutions to seek efficiencies and reduce their reliance on county tax dollars in light of the fiscal realities we face. As County Auditor Jerome Heer testified at the time, *"We need a commitment from the War Memorial and the Milwaukee Art Museum to develop a funding stream that does not – not – include Milwaukee County."*

I agreed with this responsible and forward-looking vote at the time, and I still do. Unfortunately, the 10 year commitment just passed by the Board flies in the face of sustainability by increasing the tax dollars expended while significantly decreasing accountability.

I am troubled that the Board is so willing to lock the County in to a decade-long funding stream while giving up County oversight of tax dollars. Even though we are providing 20% more money, the County's appointments on the War Memorial Board are being reduced from eight to just two.

We don't know what the future holds for our budget needs, but this guarantees \$16 million we can't use for core services like transit, parks and mental health. Decisions like this increase our structural deficit, undercut our flexibility and progress towards a sustainable County government, and invite skepticism from the public we represent about just how seriously we take our obligation to be responsible stewards of their money.

We all share the goal for the War Memorial Center to be a vibrant symbol of our community and to fulfill its mission of honoring the dead by serving the living. To that end, I joined Supervisors last year supporting a \$10 million County investment to make sure that the long-deferred maintenance issues at the War Memorial are addressed. This \$10 million investment will result in a facility that we will all be proud of.

However, that infrastructure investment has nothing to do with this resolution. The deal passed by the Board increases annual operating support that will largely go towards very significant salaries and benefits.

My grandfather, Mannert 'Jim' Abele, was a Submarine Commander who gave his life in WWII and was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for his sacrifice. I have never in my life been unclear about honoring the service and sacrifice of all who have served to protect this country, nor have I ever taken for granted what they fought (and fight) to protect. That is precisely why I am concerned with actual services for veterans. The approximately \$300,000 a year that this resolution adds to these two organizations is roughly the same size as the entire budget for the Milwaukee County Veterans Service Office, which helps connect veterans with grants and scholarships, healthcare, jobs, legal advice, etc. I continue to believe that both veterans and taxpayers would have appreciated a decision to provide far more services with their tax dollars. I know I would have.

I realize and accept that I can't change Supervisors minds on this deal. I will, however, dedicate money in the budget to actually help veterans in need. I hope Supervisors will be as willing to support that investment as they were to pass this deal.



Chris Abele, Milwaukee County Executive