

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: June 18, 2025

To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Guy Smith, Executive Director for Milwaukee County Parks

Subject: Requesting authorization to make a capital funding commitment to the restoration of the Mitchell Park Domes contingent upon further approvals of a Lease Agreement, Development Agreement, and other necessary agreements between Milwaukee County and the Milwaukee Domes Alliance.

File Type: Action Report

REQUEST

Authorization to make a commitment of County capital funding not to exceed \$30,000,000 to implement the Domes Reimagined Plan which involves the transfer of the Mitchell Park Domes to the Milwaukee Domes Alliance contingent upon further approvals of a Lease Agreement, Development Agreement, and other necessary agreements.

POLICY

The 2025 Milwaukee County Budget included Amendment #06 which, among other things, stated –

“Milwaukee County authorizes and directs the Director of Parks, Recreation and Culture to:

- Collaborate with the Office of Corporation Counsel and other relevant departments to develop an agreement (“Agreement”) with the Friends of the Domes for the implementation of the “Domes Reimagined” plan, subject to County Board review and approval. The Agreement shall, among other things, include the following elements:
 - Creation of a long-term lease which places Friends of the Domes in charge of operations for the facility, while Mitchell Park remains the property of the County Parks Department.
 - Support for County efforts to have the Mitchell Park Domes listed on the National Register of Historic Places after the restoration process has commenced.
 - Clearly defined benchmarks, contingencies and conditions that must be met before County funds are released, expended or redevelopment begins.
 - A commitment by Milwaukee County to allocate \$30 million over a six-year period toward the project.
- Provide a progress update on these initiatives to the County Board no later than the May 2025 meeting cycle.”

Wisconsin State Statutes:	
Milwaukee County Code of General Ordinances:	
Specific Adopted Budget:	2025
Specific Adopted Budget Amendment:	06
Specific Adopted Capital Project:	

BACKGROUND

Milwaukee County Parks is requesting approval to transfer the Mitchell Park Domes from County ownership and operation to the Milwaukee Domes Alliance (fka “the Friends of the Domes”). This approval is being requested through separate consecutive requests. First is to request authorization to provide the County’s funding commitment of up to \$30,000,000 to the Domes Reimagined Plan. Second is to request approval of the documents that are necessary to transfer the Domes to the Milwaukee Domes Alliance including a Lease and Development Agreement. The approval of the first request is contingent upon the approval of the second request.

To enable this transfer, the County and Milwaukee Domes Alliance have negotiated agreements that govern the long-term operations of the facility, the process of providing County funding to the restoration of the Domes, and the oversight of construction during the course of the Domes rehabilitation. The final Lease and Development Agreements will be presented during the next County Board meeting cycle, the major Terms of these Agreements are listed in this report.

Project Description

The project is to allow the Milwaukee Domes Alliance to conduct a historic rehabilitation of the Mitchell Park Domes and to transfer the building and obligations from Milwaukee County to the Milwaukee Domes Alliance. The project will proceed in phases with each phase generally being focused on the restoration of one of the Domes structures. The Milwaukee Domes Alliance seeks to make other targeted improvements to the facility that was described in prior reports to the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors, in particular File #24-723.

The Milwaukee Domes Alliance will be the primary funder of this project through a layered funding strategy that includes Milwaukee County funding capped at \$30,000,000. The Milwaukee County contribution to the project will be made in installment contributions through the annual Milwaukee County capital budget until the full contribution is met. The total Domes restoration and improvement project (Phases 1A, 1B and 1C) is estimated to cost \$111,800,000 which will require a 3.7 to 1 leverage of private sources from the County investment.

- Phase 1A: Show Dome, Transition Dome, Family Bathrooms, Building Mechanical Systems, Lobby, Gift Shop, Entry, Café
 - Estimated start date = Spring 2027
 - Estimated cost = \$47.8M
- Phase 1B: Desert Dome, Education Center Offices, Hallway to Bathrooms, Landscaping
 - Estimated start date = Spring 2029
 - Estimated cost = \$31.5M

- Phase 1C: Tropical Dome, New Restrooms, Mitchell Park improvements
 - Estimated start date = Spring 2030
 - Estimated cost = \$32.5M
- Phase 2: New education, event, and visitors center
 - To be built once all of Phase 1 is complete
 - Located adjacent to Domes facility, south of the Tropical Dome
 - Fully funded by the Milwaukee Domes Alliance, no County funding contribution

Lease Agreement

The Lease Agreement governs the long-term operations of the Mitchell Park Domes by the Milwaukee Domes Alliance. The Domes are currently owned by Milwaukee County Parks and are operated with assistance by the Milwaukee Domes Alliance for programming, education, and support. In the future the Milwaukee Domes Alliance would provide all operating support for the facility with the County only continuing to maintain Horticulture operations. The major terms of the Lease Agreement are as follows –

- Term Length – up to 99 years
- Ownership – Milwaukee County would own and lease the land and transfer the improvements to Milwaukee Domes Alliance
- Maintenance and capital replacement – Milwaukee Domes Alliance would be responsible
- Term begins – Milwaukee Domes Alliance leases from the County as soon as funds are raised to begin Phase 1A of the project (Show Dome and targeted interior improvements)
- Operations transfer – Milwaukee Domes Alliance will assume all building maintenance and operational responsibilities upon completion of Phase 1A
- Phase 2 Lease – Milwaukee Domes Alliance could lease from County additional land for the building expansion contemplated in the project's second phase
- Milwaukee Domes Alliance would be responsible for all revenue and expense associated with facility operations

Development Agreement

The Development Agreement governs the construction of improvements and rehabilitation of the historic Domes structure that is to be managed by the Milwaukee Domes Alliance. It outlines the requirements of the transaction that need to be met for it to move forward. The major terms of the Development Agreement are as follows -

- Release of County funding – Milwaukee County funding will be released based on the timing of the phase of the project and the ability of the Milwaukee Domes Alliance to produce the funding match from other sources.
- Greenhouse Lease - Milwaukee County Parks will maintain Horticulture operations within the greenhouses, the Lease requires a separate agreement to govern the use of the facility for County staff
- Plant Collection Lease – Milwaukee County will lease to the Milwaukee Domes Alliance the plant collection that is currently shown at the Domes.
- Employee Share Plan - Milwaukee County Parks will maintain the plant collections within

the Domes, the Lease requires a separate agreement to govern the operations of County and Milwaukee Domes Alliance staff.

- Targeted Business Enterprise participation – achieve the County’s goals set for TBE participation
- Project phasing and plan review – Milwaukee Domes Alliance would manage construction while Milwaukee County would have plan review oversight

Financial Overview

The project requires a County commitment of up to \$30,000,000 spread across multiple capital budgets. The County shall fund its capital commitment as installment payments based on the Terms outlined in the Development Agreement. Such Terms are subject to review by the Office of the Comptroller to ensure compliance with bond rules, the Office of Strategy, Budget and Performance to ensure financial capacity to fund such a commitment, and the Office of Corporation Counsel to ensure compliance with the Development Agreement. Each installment contribution to this project is subject to annual appropriation within the County’s capital budget.

Milwaukee County Parks appreciates the fiscal challenges that Milwaukee County government is facing. In order to fund the County commitment Milwaukee County Parks will advocate for this project to be the Department’s highest priority in upcoming capital requests and understands that if Milwaukee County is able to fund the County commitment, then other requested capital projects from the Parks Department may not be able to receive funding.

It is anticipated that by shifting operations and maintenance responsibilities to the Milwaukee Domes Alliance, Milwaukee County will realize significant operating expense savings. It is anticipated that the savings to Milwaukee County will be an estimated \$770,000 per year once all operations and maintenance tasks become the responsibility of the Milwaukee Domes Alliance.

Related File No’s:	22-697, 22-1184, 23-666, 23-787, 24-723, 25-244
Associated File No’s (Including Transfer Packets):	
Previous Action Date(s):	

ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Describe how the item aligns to the objectives in the [strategic plan](#):

- 1A: Reflect the full diversity of the County at every level of County government
- 1B: Create and nurture an inclusive culture across County government
- 1C: Increase the number of County contracts awarded to minority and women-owned businesses – The Domes Reimagined project support TBE goals during the construction phase of the project
- 2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity – Mitchell Park is the highest rank park on the Park Equity Index (10/10) an investment of this magnitude strongly supports the County’s equity goal of advancing health equity
- 2B: Break down silos across County government to maximize access to and quality of services offered

- 2C: Apply a racial equity lens to all decisions – Mitchell Park and the Domes are located in a high equity need area, prioritizing equity in capital investments is a key part of implementation of the County's vision
- 3A: Invest "upstream" to address root causes of health disparities
- 3B: Enhance the County's fiscal health and sustainability – The Domes Reimagined campaign leverages a greater than 3:1 ratio of private investment to the County's investment.
- 3C: Dismantle barriers to diverse and inclusive communities – The Domes Reimagined campaign has strong community support and is built on years of public engagement, following through on the community's desire to complete this restoration honors the community's feedback

FISCAL EFFECT

- Capital investment of up to \$30,000,000 over a multi-year period
- Operational savings of \$770,000 per year upon completion of Phase 1A

TERMS

- Lease term length – up to 99 years

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

Christa Beall Diefenbach, Executive Director of the Milwaukee Domes Alliance
cbeall@milwaukeehomes.org

PREPARED BY:

Jim Tarantino, Deputy Director, Milwaukee County Parks

APPROVED BY:

Guy Smith, Executive Director Milwaukee County Parks

ATTACHMENTS:

- 1) Resolution
- 2) Fiscal Note

CC: David Crowley, County Executive
Mary Jo Meyers, Chief of Staff, County Executive's Office
Sheldon Wasserman, Committee on Parks & Culture Chairperson
Steve Taylor, Committee on Parks & Culture Vice Chairperson
Priscilla Coggs-Jones, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Jack Eckblad, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Felesia Martin, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Juan Miguel Martinez, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Anne O'Connor, Committee on Parks & Culture Member
Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Mgr, Office of the County Clerk
Aaron Hertzberg, Director, Department of Administrative Services
Joseph Lamers, Fiscal & Budget Director, DAS
Vince Masterson, Fiscal & Strategic Asset Coordinator, DAS
Pamela Bryant, Capital Finance Manager, Comptroller's Office
Justin Rodriguez, Capital Finance Analyst, Comptroller's Office
Allyson R. Smith, Committee Coordinator, Office of the County Clerk
Anthony Rux, Budget & Management Analyst, DAS-PSB
Sandy Saltzstein, Research and Policy Analyst