

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: August 15, 2025

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

From: Guy Smith, Executive Director for Milwaukee County Parks

Subject: Approval of a Lease Agreement and a Development Agreement with the Milwaukee Domes Alliance.

File Type: Action Report

REQUEST

Authorization to enter into a Lease Agreement and a Development Agreement between Milwaukee County Parks and the Milwaukee Domes Alliance to support the revitalization of the Mitchell Park Domes.

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.”

File #25-458, approved by the Milwaukee County Board on July 24, 2025, states –

“ BE IT RESOLVED, subject to annual appropriation, the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors (County Board) authorizes the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Culture (DPRC), in coordination with the Office of Strategy, Budget, and Performance

(OSBP), to include the Milwaukee County (the County) contribution in future County capital budgets as installments, with the total contribution not-to-exceed \$30,000,000 (the County Capital Contribution), in support of the rehabilitation and improvement of the Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory (the Domes); and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the approval and release of the County Capital Contribution is contingent upon approvals by the County Board of both the Lease Agreement and Development Agreement between the County and the Milwaukee Domes Alliance, and further contingent upon compliance with the terms and conditions set forth in those agreements.”

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 operation to the Milwaukee Domes Alliance (aka “the Friends of the Domes”). This approval is being requested as a contingency of the approved funding commitment of up to \$30,000,000 to the Domes Reimagined Plan that was approved in July 2025.

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.

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

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 Development Agreement is also the operative agreement during the period of the project before the Lease Term begins. 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.
- Project Financing Structure – the Project will -
 - Require creation of condominium units tied to specific project phases. All condominium units would be subleased by affiliates of MDA. This is necessary to secure Historic Tax Credit funding to the project.
 - Include a capital campaign implemented by MDA
 - Pledges and fundraising contributions will be subject to financial review and reconciliation by Milwaukee County.
 - Other sources may include construction loans, proceeds of the sale or allocation of Historic Tax Credits, bridge loans for New Market Tax Credit financing, and other State, City or other sources.
- Project phase commencement dates –
 - The dates listed above are the targeted commencement dates for each project phase, the phases are projected to occur no later than –
 - Phase 1A – December 31, 2028
 - Phase 1B – upon substantial completion of Phase 1A, no later than December 31, 2034
 - Phase 1C – upon substantial completion of Phase 1B, no later than December 31, 2034
- County Financial Commitment by Project Phase –
 - Milwaukee County funding would be made available on a pro rata basis determined by the total cost of the phase (listed above). The total County financial

commitment by phase will include –

- Phase 1A - \$12,900,000
- Phase 1B - \$8,400,000
- Phase 1C - \$8,800,000
- Targeted Business Enterprise participation – achieve the County’s goals set for TBE participation (25% for construction, 17% for professional services)
- Project phasing and plan review – Milwaukee Domes Alliance would manage construction while Milwaukee County would have plan review oversight in two primary stages – conceptual plan review and detailed plan review. Project phasing and plan review will also include a budget assessment to ensure that funds are available to begin work and release County funding commitments.
- Reporting – MDA will provide quarterly reports to Milwaukee County related to the capital campaign and other fundraising activities and overall progress.

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 – 99 years
- Ownership – Milwaukee County would own and lease the land and transfer the improvements to Milwaukee Domes Alliance
- Public access – the Domes and leased areas will remain publicly accessible and for a public purpose
- 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.
- Maintenance and capital replacement – Milwaukee Domes Alliance will be responsible for all building and facility maintenance
- Maintenance reserve fund – MDA will be responsible for establishing and maintaining a reserve of funds dedicated to building maintenance
- 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, pending certain contingencies including the full completion of Phases 1A, 1B, and 1C
- Milwaukee Domes Alliance would be responsible for all revenue and expense associated with facility operations

- Reporting – MDA will provide annual reports to the County with a report to the County Board once every 5 years

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. 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, 25-458
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

- Referenced above in this report

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 *Guy D. Smith*

ATTACHMENTS:

Resolution
Fiscal Note
Development Agreement
Lease Agreement

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
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