



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Chris Abele

MILWAUKEE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

DATE: March 23, 2016

TO: The Honorable Milwaukee Board of Supervisors

FROM: Chris Abele, Milwaukee County Executive

RE: County Board File No. 15-691 expressing support for Independent Redistricting in Milwaukee County

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I applaud the County Board for adopting new a policy for Milwaukee County to accomplish independent redistricting of the County Board seats. As a long-time supporter of removing the political interests of elected officials in determining their own districts, I am happy to see Milwaukee County take a leading role in this effort.

The resolution and ordinance change in File 15-691 are massive and monumental first steps in removing political influence from the drawing of the districts of the county board. Milwaukee County should be congratulated for taking these steps in creating the Independent Redistricting Commission (IRC). It is my hope that in the coming months we, as a county, take further steps to make independent redistricting devoid of any political interference from elected officials.

To that end, it is crucial to point to improvements that can be made to this historic decision. As with other independent redistricting models we need to rethink the appointing power to the IRC so that no confirmation bias can be present in pre-disposing the mapmakers to one outcome versus another. Allowing elected officials to appoint these members allows for the possibility of that bias to continue to exist.

I am concerned and would be supportive of changes to the ordinance that removes the language in newly created ordinance 3.01(4) that the IRC should be "heeding...elected official comment". To instruct the IRC to listen to the political desires of elected officials runs contrary to the purposes of this file. Also, the ordinance should be strengthened to instruct the IRC to disregard any mention or knowledge of the current residential address of an incumbent. Independent redistricting must be for the best purposes of the district not for the continuation of incumbency.

Toward the goal of giving complete confidence to the electorate of the independent nature of this process, Milwaukee County should seriously consider utilizing the Legislative Reference Bureau to draw these maps. The professionals at the LRB are relied on during times of judicial review of the maps. SEWRPC is a trusted planning source for the County but is in itself a political entity wholly subject to the pressures that we as local officials can place on them. The LRB is not in any way

accountable to us nor can be influenced by the county elected leaders. True independence could be gained through a strong contract with the LRB.

A meaningful redistricting process should have public input and engagement. Redistricting is complicated – even setting aside political interests, the redistricting process has to consider communities of interest, compactness of districts, contiguity of districts, municipal boundaries, protection of disadvantaged populations, and other factors when maps are drawn. Elected officials often use this complexity to swiftly maneuver through a process that protects their interests while minimizing informed public scrutiny. It is our responsibility to ensure that the public is fully equipped to meaningfully participate in the redistricting process, and we should be willing to commit the resources and time that it will take to ensure that public participation. A model process would devote resources to educating the public on how the process works and would give them a genuine opportunity to impact the drawing of the maps outside the usual open-mic public hearings. This is a great once-in-a-decade civic engagement opportunity and worth some investment of resources. I hope the Board takes that opportunity.

Making these changes can add further independent review and trust to this new process. I look forward to working together to improve on this fundamental, transformational change the board has initiated.