

# Commentary: Brookfield mayor 'very frustrated' with Legislature

By Andrew Weiland - Apr 12, 2021 4:47 pm

*Wisconsin State Capitol*

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**Previously, I wrote** about how the Republican-controlled state Legislature has reduced local control in Wisconsin, giving local government officials less power to make decisions and set policies for their communities.

My commentary focused on how this was affecting Milwaukee. Republicans won't allow local officials to hold a referendum to increase their sales tax to raise revenue, Act 10 has provided tremendous savings for local governments but it doesn't apply to police and fire unions (which could provide more savings for local government), Republicans don't want local officials to cut their police budgets and residency rules have been banned. All of those issues affect Milwaukee's fiscal condition and are decisions that should be made locally, not by state government.

However, it's not just liberals in Milwaukee County concerned about this. I received an email from Brookfield Mayor Steve Ponto.

"I just read your commentary on restoring local control and want to say that I agree with every point you raised," he said. "I am a Republican but am very frustrated with the state Legislature."

Republicans controlling state government have reduced shared revenue with local communities, which they justified by providing cost saving tools via Act 10, while at the same time local communities in Wisconsin are limited in what they can do to increase revenue. They have to rely on property taxes and fees, and there's a limit to how much they are allowed to increase property taxes. One of the few ways local communities can increase revenue is if development occurs, which grows their tax base. Without new development, it's tough.

"There should be a floor to allow levy limit increases when municipalities experience little

net new construction,” Ponto said. “There was such a floor when (property tax) levy limits were first introduced in 2006. That floor ranged from 2% to 3.86%, but the floor was eliminated in 2011. ...Wisconsin municipalities should have more potential sources of revenue so they don't have to rely so heavily on the property tax and state aids.”

Two years ago, a coalition that included the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce and the Greater Milwaukee Committee backed an increase in the Milwaukee County sales tax to reduce property taxes and fund local government. Leaders from each of the county's municipalities backed the initiative.

Gov. Tony Evers' wants to allow local communities to increase their sales tax, if approved by voters, but the idea was quickly rejected by Republicans in the Legislature.

“The governor's proposal to allow larger municipalities to have a local option sales tax if it is approved by a referendum is a good step,” Ponto said. “The local option sales tax could be used, in part, to reduce property taxes.”

Clearly, Republicans in the Legislature aren't going to listen to Milwaukee officials, but maybe they'll listen to the mayor of Brookfield.