



Office of the Mayor

David J. Cieslewicz, Mayor

Same letter sent to all Dane County legislators.

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February 14, 2006

Honorable Fred Risser
Wisconsin State Senate
P.O. Box 7882
Madison, WI 53707-7882

Re: Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR)

Dear Senator ~~Risser~~ .

I am writing today to thank you for your past opposition to TABOR and other similar proposals that harm the ability of local governments to provide essential basic services like fire and police protection. I hope you will continue to oppose such legislation in the future, including the most recent version of TABOR introduced this past week. While I obviously share your opposition to these proposals, I do hope that the proposal will spur long-overdue reforms to address the property tax issue.

TABOR's fatal flaw is that it is a one-size-fits-all answer to a more complicated problem. The issues at stake are different from community to community and the answers that Madisonians would support are different from what would be acceptable in other communities. We need to find property tax relief solutions that respect local control and local values.

I believe that we must start with four basic principles:

- Respect for local control
- Carrots rather than sticks
- Greater support for public health and safety programs
- More emphasis on regional cooperation and economic development.

I hope that in the months to come, these principles can be translated into specific proposals that would be viable alternatives to TABOR.

For our part, the City of Madison has been working to become more efficient and keep property tax increases down. The tax levy increase in the 2006 Madison budget was the third lowest in the last two decades, and the budget actually includes fewer city government positions than the previous year -- the first reduction in city positions in recent history. In fact, in my three budgets, the total number of City employees has increased by only 10 compared to 120 in the previous three years.

Unfortunately, the benefits of our frugal local decision-making are reduced because of the steady decline in state support for vital local services. In 1990, property taxes made up about 54% of the city budget; today that figure is almost 70%, due to the decades-long decline in shared revenue and other local aids. The result is that any property tax relief we generate through local spending restraint is being offset by the decline in state support.

It is important that local governments offer a positive alternative to TABOR. This debate can't just be about what we're against. Local government leaders know that property taxes are a problem. We need to let people know that we want to work with the Legislature to find solutions.

I look forward to working with you on finding solutions that, unlike TABOR, address the issue of property taxes without threatening essential local services.

Sincerely,



David J. Cieslewicz
Mayor

DJC/III

cc: President and Members, Madison Common Council
Ed Huck, Alliance of Cities
Mark O'Connell, Wisconsin Counties Association
Dan Thompson, League of Wisconsin Municipalities