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## **Framing the issues facing the next Milwaukee County executive**

*Election brief sheds new light on county challenges*

**MILWAUKEE** – A Milwaukee County Executive Election Brief released today by the non-partisan Public Policy Forum updates and summarizes its recent research on the scope and nature of key issues facing Milwaukee County government and serves as an election primer for both voters and candidates.

“During the past three years, the Forum has researched and written extensively on the county’s vast structural deficit, as well as three key areas of county services that are experiencing their own unique and severe fiscal and programmatic challenges,” says Forum President Rob Henken. “Our Election Brief is an effort to make these issues comprehensible to voters, and to encourage the candidates to offer solutions.”

The report begins with an overview of Milwaukee County’s budget and finances that provides a broad sense of the county’s budgetary structure and its longstanding fiscal challenges. Then, it summarizes and updates the Forum’s recent research on four primary areas of challenge that are

critical to the government's sustainability and the region's quality of life: the structural deficit, mass transit, mental health services, and parks/recreation/culture.

The following are some of the new policy insights included in the report:

- New financial modeling by county budget officials is anticipated to show that the size of the projected structural deficit for 2015 would be reduced substantially if the full range of wage and benefit concessions included in the last two county budgets are implemented. The reduction would be produced not only by the considerable impacts of the wage and benefit changes, but also by several additional recent improvements to the county's long-term outlook, including strong pension fund investment returns, continued health care savings and workforce reductions.
- The threat of severe cuts in mass transit service is delayed until at least 2015 because of a recent influx of federal stimulus funds, as well as additional one-time federal dollars from direct appropriations and from the regional planning commission's allocation process. By that year, however, a full-fledged funding crisis could re-emerge.
- A five-year analysis of mental health budgets shows increased spending on inpatient services (including a 30% increase in property tax levy expenditures since 2006), and decreased spending on community-based services. This trend runs counter to national norms, as other communities have placed greater emphasis on community-based services as a means of providing treatment to consumers *before* they require costlier inpatient care.

- A similar analysis of parks and zoo budgets shows the parks department has seen slightly reduced overall expenditures since 2008 and lost more than 60 full-time positions, while zoo expenditures grew slightly. A key question going forward is whether the status quo is sufficient for the parks and zoo given the extent of longstanding maintenance and infrastructure needs and the imperative to continuously reinvest in facilities and attractions to draw visitors and maintain earned revenue.

The report also poses for voters – and the candidates themselves – vital questions and policy considerations surrounding each of the four broad topics. Those questions will form the basis for discussion at a county executive candidates forum that will be held by the Forum on February 4.

“By focusing the candidates’ attention on these questions and considerations, it is our hope to elevate thoughtful and rigorous policy discussions to the forefront of the county executive’s race,” says Henken.

The report was made possible by a grant from the Richard and Ethel Herzfeld Foundation. It can be downloaded from the Forum’s Web site at [www.publicpolicyforum.org](http://www.publicpolicyforum.org). Details on the candidates forum also are available on the Web site.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

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