



DANE COUNTY

Joe Parisi
County Executive

November 17, 2021

To: Dane County Board Supervisors

Fr: Joe Parisi, Dane County Executive

Re: Executive Action on 2022 County Budget

Today I signed the 2022 Dane County budget. I'm incredibly proud of our county's leadership on the challenges of these times: improving access to and the quality of mental and behavioral health services, confronting climate change, and recovering from the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic. This budget charts the course for a very busy year ahead and I'm very enthusiastic about the opportunities in front of us.

The vast majority of the work we did together this fall is worth celebrating. However, there is one provision in the Operating Budget resolution I am particularly troubled by and as such have exercised my partial veto.

The budget adopted by the County Board creates a sub-committee of county employees and elected officials to consider how we as a county compare with other employers with the wages and benefits we offer. Any analysis of this question should be done by professionals inherently aware of external comparable data, factors influencing the labor market and most importantly it needs to be free of even the appearance of prejudice.

Our county workforce received anywhere from a 6% to 9% wage increase in this budget. We offer our workers premium free health insurance that comes complete with low co-pays and deductibles. Our employees weren't subject to furloughs, wage reductions or layoffs during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic. They continued to be offered Covid leave, benefit from a retirement enhancement program, family leave and other incentives that only the most progressive employers offer. We always do right by our employees.

My budget included \$200,000 for an independent wage compensation study. The Chair of the Board's Personnel and Finance Committee informed me late Friday that the employee groups and Board Supervisors were opposed to my proposal for a third-party independent review because it would likely show several classifications of county employees being paid more than their comparable counterparts while a number of county managers are likely earning less than their peers. The entire point of my proposal was ensuring the county was remaining as competitive as an employer as possible in the midst of the post Covid employment shift we are seeing nationally right now. The County Board eliminated my proposal in favor of creating an internal work-group, a sub-committee in which all 16 of the members are county employees, members of county unions or employee groups, and county elected officials. This isn't the right group to accurately (or impartially) answer the question, "are Dane County employees being compensated consistent with the labor market regionally and nationally?"

Our county just completed an independent redistricting process in which the influence of politics was limited from the important work of drawing legislative districts. As similar questions arose with the jail this fall, the County Board contracted with a national criminal justice expert to independently review the challenge at hand. When important questions arise, we have a long respected history of partnering with independent experts, well-respected for impartial, professional work product. An independent process would allow us to deal with issues like wage disparity and wage compression in an objective manner, rather than continuing to pit different classifications of employees against one another as we saw during the recent budget process. This divisiveness isn't who we are and I can't support a process that continues to both enable and embolden this mindset and approach. The entire country is divided right now. Those who advance policies that pit worker against worker in our own ranks are not acting in the spirit of the "Dane County Way."

If we are unwilling to have a similar independently led process to review external wage comparisons, then we should just forego the work for now.

My partial veto allows for creation of the sub-committee but with a focus on the important questions of equity as they relate to new employee recruitment and retention. This allows a forum to discuss outdated measures like "seniority transfer" and "internal hire only" practices that allow existing county employees a first crack at employment vacancies within the county. These impair our ability to select from a racially and ethnically diverse applicant pool.

Attached to this memo is Dane County's Equity Analysis of Recruitment Practices as conducted by the Racial Equity Team in 2016. Let me call your attention to Recommendations #1 and #7. We have talked about these barriers for years. The sub-committee created in this budget is the proper forum to hear why Employee Groups are concerned with reforming these practices that are barriers to the diversification of our workforce.

My limited veto accomplishes two things. It allows the committee to proceed with a more limited, targeted focus and supports the County Board's precedence of independently led processes. Should my veto not be sustained, I will direct the Department of Administration and Division of Employee Relations to contract with external agencies to conduct limited scope, independent wage compensation analyses of certain county employment classifications. This will be done consistent with the county's purchasing and contracting rules and the data will be shared with the sub-committee later in 2022. Additionally, if the sub-committee proceeds as drafted, County Board staff will need to coordinate this work product. I will not assign the County's Director of Employee Relations or her staff to a process that lacks independence or impartiality.

I think it best we take the coming year to have a genuine dialogue about how to address this question independently, comprehensively, and without bias. The sub-committee as proposed is the wrong venue to fairly and accurately complete this assignment. It can however provide helpful guidance on how we best implement reforms to outdated hiring practices that enable inequality.

Thank you.