



COUNTY OF KENOSHA COUNTY EXECUTIVE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

2021 Kenosha County Budget Address by County Executive Jim Kreuser:

Good evening, Chairman O'Day, Vice-Chair Yuhas, members of the County Board, elected officials, and fellow citizens of Kenosha County.

Every day, great things happen in Kenosha County.

Make no mistake, we've been challenged in 2020 on a variety of fronts. But I believe in Kenosha County — and there will be plenty of positive change and bright days ahead for us in 2021.

We were tested early in the year, when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived on our doorstep and assured us 2020 would be a year like no other.

And then we were tested in an even greater way beginning on the evening of Aug. 23, when the officer-involved shooting of Jacob Blake spurred civil unrest // and later the loss of two lives — perhaps, the saddest chapter in our county's long history.

The budget I will present to you tonight looks forward from those bleak days, and continues us on a path to healing, recovery, action, justice and peace.

We've already begun to take on this challenge of dismantling racism in our community.

We're making an internal examination within county government — through a Kenosha County Diversity Task Force that retired Workforce Development Director Adelene Greene is overseeing.

And we're committed to instituting racial equity training for all of our county employees in 2021.

We're also going to be engaging in an external examination of our policies and procedures, working with a group such as the Government Alliance on Race & Equity. We will have more to announce on that in the coming weeks and months.

Lastly, the budget resolution that will go before you in November will include a commitment to launch a Racial Equity Commission in 2021. We've all heard calls for public input in the process of tackling systemic racism. This commission will be a place to focus that energy and deliver meaningful results.

This board will have input in the formation of the commission — you will have a vote on its composition and mission statement, and the group will make regular reports back to the Executive Committee on the progress of its work.

This budget also puts an emphasis on security — the security of our county employees, our county properties, and — most importantly — everyone who calls Kenosha County home.

And at the same time, we'll continue to put a high priority on our infrastructure — building it out so that we can continue to capitalize on our position as a hot spot for economic development in our region, the nation, and the world.

Back on Aug. 23, when the unrest hit our community, our law enforcement took control of our downtown Civic Center campus and secured our county facilities from the individuals who mostly came from outside our community, looking to wreak havoc and destruction on our city.

Now, this budget contains items to in fact bolster our situation if this ever occurs again — much like how airport security changed after 9/11.

This budget adds six deputies to address Civic Center security, including four designated for assignment in and around the Courthouse — replacing the contracted agency we currently retain — and two others for civic campus support.

This budget includes measures to improve the security of our employees working in the county Administration Building, and upgrades to security systems in some of our facilities.

And — this should be no surprise to you, as you asked for it before all of the unrest — this budget includes the purchase of body cameras for our sheriff's deputies, and the personnel needed to administer and manage records for this program.

We were overdue in this regard. As body cams have become the norm in law enforcement departments across the U.S. in recent years, the Kenosha community lagged behind. This board resolved to change that back in early August, and I am pleased to follow through on your request.

Going forward, this administration will be working with the Sheriff's Department to make sure body cameras are implemented in a way that ensures positive results.

We'll approach this from a business perspective — making sure there's quality control. Striving for best practices on police calls and using the video for continuous improvement in a positive way, this will get all of us the accountability we're seeking — for our law enforcement officers, and the public.

We're spending a lot of money on this equipment. We want to make sure it's money well spent.

Earlier this year — and with my full support — this County Board took another action on Aug. 4, declaring racism to be a public health crisis in our county. And again, this was before the unrest that served as a jarring reminder of the inequities that persist.

Change is needed. Listening is needed.

Racism cannot be tolerated in Kenosha County. Together, we can make our county that much stronger by our collective actions.

For years, Kenosha County has placed its Human Services building where it's convenient, and not where it actually serves the majority of the public, those in need of services. And as our aging building — the Job Center — deteriorates and its useful life is almost gone, this budget provides us for the next decades of service to neighborhoods that are truly in the most need.

With potential partnerships with the City of Kenosha and the State of Wisconsin, we're developing plans to move our Human Services functions to a site in the Uptown area, yet undetermined — bringing more than 420 jobs to that immediate neighborhood, along with the thousands of users who will visit the facility each week.

This budget includes funds to get that project off the ground, with a possible move-in to follow as soon as 2022.

This will bring Human Services to where it belongs — in the heart of the community, where the services are needed.

But this isn't the only thing we should be doing to strengthen the Uptown area, hit so hard by the destruction in late August.

We need to be working with the business community, the city and others in tackling the food desert issue in that neighborhood.

Todd Battle, president of the Kenosha Area Business Alliance, agrees. To that end, KABA has commissioned a market study to help determine how to best address this issue. And Todd tells me KABA is committed to working with the neighborhood and other community partners to find a sustainable solution.

We are going to build on that commitment and do our part to transform and lift up that neighborhood!

The Human Services Department is also where we house the Division of Health. And, as you all know, it would be an understatement to say they've been a little busy this year.

I commend our health director, Dr. Jen Freiheit, and her staff for all of their hard work in guiding us through what we hope will be a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. Jen joined Kenosha County not even a year ago — before we could have even imagined a public health event of this magnitude — and I'm so thankful that she's been here to guide us through COVID-19.

Meantime, amid the pandemic and the civil unrest later in the year, another county division showed the value of some of our past investments of time and money.

When COVID-19 rolled in and the stay-home lockdown began in March, IT supported the almost immediate transition to remote working for hundreds of county employees, across virtually all of our departments and divisions.

Prior to all of this, IT and all of our departments worked on continuity-of-operations plans — *and now we know those plans work!*

Hats off to former CIO Marty Lacock, who began his well-earned retirement at mid-year, and to our new CIO, Shawn Smith, whose appointment this board confirmed in July.

Much of the success that we've had in IT, turning on a dime to change our working structure in response to crisis, is also due to the investments this board has made in the past.

The ERP system that was implemented two years ago, thanks to your support, was a key player in keeping the county's business functions working while some of our employees were working from home.

Investments in cybersecurity helped to keep Kenosha County's systems safe when other communities elsewhere ground to a halt when their systems were hacked earlier this year.

Using our systems and their skills, our IT team was proactive in preventing attacks here — and they will continue to be, for the upcoming election and beyond.

Infrastructure leads to economic development, which leads to jobs. We've made significant investments in our infrastructure over the last 12 years, and under this budget, we will continue to do so in 2021.

If you take a drive in or out of town on Highway S, you'll see the largest Kenosha County highway project in our history — *now in full swing.*

Work on the Highway S project began this past spring, and will continue through late 2021, when we'll have a four-lane, divided highway from Highway 31 all the way out to the Interstate.

It's the road we need to support the tremendous economic development that we're seeing in the Village of Somers and what's now the far-northwest side of Kenosha. And it's the road we need to keep the trucks flowing in and out of Amazon, Uline and the tenants of First Park 94 — and all of the other developments to come in that area.

Highway projects make up 60 percent of our capital budget, and highway equipment is another 4 percent. These are investments that we're making in Kenosha County's future.

And we know that employers are watching and making their decisions to locate or expand here due to these investments.

In 2008, the Kenosha Area Business Alliance identified 23 companies that it considered to be to be major employers in our county. That list now totals 48 — and it's still growing.

Just a few weeks ago, we welcomed a new company to the Salem Business Park. R+D Custom Automation, a producer of fully customized automation systems, is investing about \$6 million to move its production facility and about 60 employees from across the border in Illinois.

This move is being supported in part by a contribution from Kenosha County's High Impact development fund, which will receive another \$250,000 allocation in the budget I'm presenting tonight.

We may have had a hitch in our giddy-up with the pandemic's effect on our economy this year. But make no mistake — the brightest days are still to come, and we've already started planning for the future.

We're also still planning — and investing — when it comes to the quality of life in Kenosha County, which we know plays a big role when companies decide where to locate, and families decide where to live.

And we also know that our parks have helped us to get through some of the darkest days of the COVID quarantine.

When just about everything else was closed earlier this year, we kept our parks open so that people could get out and get some socially distanced fresh air — and the response was remarkable.

Parks Director Matt Collins told me, there were weekdays in May when the parks looked like a weekend in July, people on the trails, in the grass and under the trees.

Kenosha County Parks were there when people needed them as a place of refuge, and we will continue to make investments — and seek outside funding as much as possible — to make them destinations of choice for recreation, and relaxation.

Supervisor Lon Wienke can tell you about the transformation that has occurred this summer out in his neck of the woods, where the old asphalt that had been dumped in what's now the Kenosha County Veterans Memorial Park is now part of the roadbed on the reconfigured Highway F.

This budget opens up that new gateway into the Kenosha County Veterans Memorial Park, giving access to the new, additional 100-plus acres of parkland that was once a construction yard.

And the veterans work group that I spoke of last year have met and have a recommendation coming to this body for action on Phase 1, for the park entryway and honor plaza that will appropriately thank our past, current and future veterans who have served our great country.

This next step is critical in the development of this park — as I have heard from the veterans who have probably also written letters to some of you.

This unique, passive park will be a therapeutic oasis for our veterans and their families to reflect on their service and sacrifices. I know that your support for this project would be appreciated by many across our county.

In summation, this budget makes investments in the health and safety of our community.

This budget formalizes the creation of a Racial Equity Commission

This budget follows through on a promise to outfit our sheriff's deputies with body cameras

This budget makes a significant investment in the Uptown area and brings Human Services closer to our people who most need them.

This budget continues our commitment to investing in the infrastructure we need for economic development and continued job growth.

This budget funds further improvements to our quality of life, like the development of the Kenosha County Veterans Memorial Park.

This budget keeps us on track toward a triple-A rating by Standard and Poors and Fitch.

And this budget accomplishes all of this at the advisory levy limit that this board adopted a few months back, before a lot changed in Kenosha County.

Now is the time for our community to come together to make Kenosha County an even better place to live, work, play and raise a family — *for everyone*.

I look forward to working with all of you as you review the 2021 Kenosha County budget. All of us pulling together is the best way to keep Kenosha County moving forward.

May God bless America, and may God bless Kenosha County.

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