

Property tax reform should be targeted to help low-income residents

This week I'm heading to Indianapolis to testify for legislation that provides targeted property tax relief to those who need it most — seniors, veterans, and first-time homebuyers — while ensuring communities like Madison continue to have adequate funding for essential services. Before I make the trip, I want to explain what property taxes fund in Madison and why current proposals are shortsighted.



BOB COURTNEY
MADISON MAYOR

As I shared in my recent State of the City address, Madison is experiencing unprecedented momentum. Tourism spending is up 17% to over \$60 million with a direct economic impact of \$20 million. We've attracted over \$200 million in new investments across our city in just the past couple of years. Our riverfront has become the jewel of the Ohio River, drawing 1.7 million visitors annually. We've made historic investments in infrastructure, with 8.4 miles of roads paved and 20 blocks of new sidewalks in 2023-24 alone. Our police and fire departments have responded to thousands of calls and invested thousands of hours in training to keep our community safe. Whether it is a police or fire emergency, or unsafe roads due to severe weather, we are there to respond 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

All of this progress and enormous investment has been achieved by efficiently raising funds to attract outside investment, while keeping debt obligations and property tax rates low. Our property tax rate has increased by 1.85% annually over the past four budget cycles — far below inflation. For the average property taxpayer, that's 2.3 cents per \$100 of assessed value over the past four years.

Your property taxes

fund just about 60% of the general operating budget that includes salaries and benefits for police, fire, streets, planning and zoning, code enforcement, parks department, communications, and the Clerk-Treasurer's office. With post-Covid high inflation, our property tax revenue increases have not kept up, so

we are always reprioritizing what it takes to keep our community clean, safe and beautiful for all and searching for other revenue sources to maintain our high expectations. The legislation as presented through Senate Bill 1 and other companion bills threatens to undermine the fiscal responsibility and progress we've made in several concerning ways:

Senate Bill 1 would cap the Maximum Levy Growth Quotient (MLGQ) at 0% in 2026, 1% in 2027, and 2% in 2028. This would create an immediate funding shortfall of over \$300 million statewide in the first year, growing to \$800 million by year three. For Madison, this would result in a funding reduction of almost \$2 million over the next three budget cycles, which will severely restrict our ability to maintain essential services and infrastructure that our residents depend on daily.

The damage goes beyond immediate cuts. By permanently reducing the base for future growth, the impact compounds year after year. This means fewer resources for public safety, street maintenance, parks, and other vital city services that maintain our quality of life. It also means less investment in addressing deferred maintenance items all across the city, particularly roads, sidewalks, and parks.

We have been purposeful to pursue new opportunities for Madison with fiscal prudence. Examples

include, the recent opening of Crystal Beach Aquatic Park, completion of our \$13 million water infrastructure project, the groundbreaking for the construction of Residences at Sunrise Crossing, our \$12 million Clifty Drive project, our neighborhood paving program and soon to be Main Street Corridor reconstruction that will enhance Madison's appeal as a place to live, work, and visit. The MLGQ freeze would hinder our ability to fulfill these commitments.

I firmly believe in careful stewardship of taxpayer dollars, and our record demonstrates that commitment but funding for essential services has to keep up with inflation, at a minimum. Madison has leveraged public-private partnerships and strategic relationships with the Community Foundation, Bethany Legacy Foundation, the Chamber of Commerce, Madison Main Street, Jefferson County, and the State of Indiana to maximize impact while keeping property taxes low.

As your Mayor, I will continue advocating for Madison's best interests as the General Assembly considers this legislation. I encourage you to contact your State Representative Alex Zimmerman and State Senator Randy Maxwell to express your views on how this bill might affect our community. Together, we can ensure that Madison's bright future remains secure.

Madison is a unique city, unlike any other in the state with vastly different needs than most. My administration remains committed to continuing the remarkable progress we've made together. As I said in my State of the City address: "Investment is the currency that helps our community grow. Together, let us answer the question about our vision for our community, and then let's go out and do it!"

HDRB approves COA for Royer expansion

BY MARK CAMPBELL

Madison Historic District Board of Review (HDBR) approved an expansion of the Royer Corporation manufacturing site, 805 East Street, that will more than double the size of the company's warehouse and provide more truck loading docks. Zack Zehren, Royer's vice president of operations, said the project will help the company keep pace with current growth and provide more space for warehousing and transportation. The addition will be almost identical to the company's previous expansion in 2018 except that it will be 9,000-square-foot rather than 7,000-square-foot and include two loading docks to bring the company's total number of docks to three.

According to Zehren, the extra space is needed because the company currently uses third party warehousing off site and the extra docks are "very critical" to providing a better workflow for loading and unloading truck trailers and delivering product to customers. He said the expansion, which will have "design elements similar" to the earlier expansion, will also take place on the north side of the facility and cover all but about 20 feet of the current pavement.

The property is zoned Light Manufacturing and the structure is non-contributing so the board unanimously approved a certificate of appropriateness.

"I thank you for keeping investing in Madison," said HBBR Chair Mike Pittman.

The HDBR also approved a proposal to upgrade the dugouts at John Paul Park by adding steel benches, roofs and fencing to the existing concrete slabs at the historic ballpark.

The bowl-shaped facility, more than a century old and located just off Third Street on the banks of Crooked Creek, is Madison's most historic ball field, a site where future Major Leaguers George Distel and Tommy Thevenow learned the game and decades of baseball and softball players competed in youth, adult, school and semi-pro leagues.

Christian Hanson, superintendent of grounds for the Madison Parks Department, said the dugout improvements will make for better playing conditions by providing a safe place for teams to sit and shelter from the sun when not in the field. Previously, the parks department announced plans to utilize the field at John Paul Park more than in past seasons by moving adult and church league softball to the facility.

The dugouts are actually considered non-contributing to the historic district so the standard for design and construction is less restrictive than contributing structures. That allows the parks department to focus the build on functionality and cost effectiveness. The board voted 7-0 in favor of the application to issue a certificate of appropriateness.

"I think it's a great project and you'll make a lot of people happy," said Pittman.

IN OTHER BUSINESS, THE BOARD

Unanimously approved an application by property owner Tony Steinhardt III to add small windows, replace a single door with a French door, install a garage door on the first floor and remove exterior stairs to the second floor of a structure at 206 West First Street. The building started out as the original location of Madison Chemical Company in the 1930s and using materials salvaged from military bases but was later converted for use as living space. Steinhardt said the structure has been vacant for about 30 years, but that he is renovating the structure to bring it back to life to once again serve as housing.

The HDBR approved the certificate of appropriateness but urged Steinhardt to retain as much of the historic stone foundation as possible and other materials.

Unanimously approved an application by Daniel Duran, 412 East Third Street, to replace existing front porch steps with less steep and safer steps that are also more consistent with steps on similar federal style homes in the 400 block of East Third Street. In addition to providing safer steps that are ADA compliant, Duran said he would also like to restore a flared approach to the steps like other homes in the area.

Unanimously approved construction of a new storage building identical to one already on property owned by J.D. Webster at 1090 West Second Street. The structures will both be non-contributing.

"We are the gateway to Indiana. Madison was the gateway to Indiana when Indiana was still a territory. We take that role very seriously. When you cross that bridge, you've entered some place special."

— Bob Courtney
Madison mayor, during his annual State of the City Address



Bob Demaree

CITY

FROM PAGE A1

Last year, Crystal Beach Aquatic Park reopened after being closed two summers because of a deteriorated pool that had to be replaced. "It was too important to let that pool die that was built in 1938. It's too important to the quality of life of Madison," Courtney said.

In addition, Ohio River Legacy Park was completed along Poplar Street to recognize the city's history and a new gateway to the city at the Milton-Madison Bridge provides a more attractive entrance. In 2023, the Shoppes at Sunrise Crossing was completed, bringing national retailers to the city. Also, the Mulberry Mural Plaza was completed that includes a renovation of the parking now surrounded by murals and just across the street from a new downtown grocery.

"Madison isn't a sleepy little town any more," Courtney said. "We are a regional destination."

Courtney talked about his administration's fight against blight elimination that has included a \$4.4 million investment in the city's PACE grant program with 31 projects

approved including 16 dilapidated and dangerous structures. He credited the city's investment in neighborhoods as a critical factor in rejuvenating those properties. "When we said our neighborhoods were important and our neighborhoods were the fabric of a vibrant city, people came along for the ride. When they saw that it was important by the city, we started doing targeted revitalization because there were areas of our community that were suffering from disinvestment," he said, crediting the new investment as "cultivating additional investment."

Courtney said the city "is in great shape financially," stating that "at any given time we have between \$15 to \$20 million of liquidity that helps us meet our obligations." However, he also noted that "Every penny is spoken for. We know exactly where it's going because of the way we are regulated and governed by the Department of Local Government Finance," and also working with the clerk-treasurer and city council. "Every year we go through a very public budgeting process that establishes where we intend to expend our money for the coming year."

He noted the city has lim-

itations on debt. "We can't go out and borrow unlimited amounts of money. There are statutory limits on that," providing checks and balances on the city with only about 60% of the annual operating budget being covered through property taxes. He said the city also is funded through fees and income taxes, and TIF districts provide other investment opportunities.

Courtney said the city also benefits from the investments made locally by "growing our tax base, creating more revenue for us that allows us to invest in making sure the services that we offer are exceptional. We also spend a lot of time trying to find better ways to do things," he said.

Courtney shared a story from a visitor to the city who told him Madison is a city that "lives bigger than it is." Courtney believes that is true. "We dream bigger and we invest bigger because we are a bigger community when you think of the millions of people that are coming through Madison" on the highways into the city. "We are the gateway to Indiana. Madison was the gateway to Indiana when Indiana was still a territory. We take that role very seriously. When you cross that bridge, you've entered some place special."

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