

# Let people decide on streetcar — through their elected representatives

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I'm not a big fan of referendums because I think the founders got it right when they created a republican form of government, in which we elect representatives to run the government and make the tough decisions.

Which is why I'm not sympathetic to [Ald. Bob Donovan's call for a referendum](#) on whether the city of Milwaukee should move forward on its \$124 million streetcar project. The project has the support of a majority of the Common Council, yet Donovan, Ald. Joe Davis and others are doing everything they can to derail the streetcar, including holding a petition drive to require the city to hold a binding referendum on the project.

The streetcar petition, which requires 31,000 signatures, would force the city to hold a binding referendum before proceeding with any rail transit system that costs more than \$20 million.

Let the people decide, Donovan says. But the people are deciding through their elected representatives on the council. That's what he and his colleagues get paid to do.

They also get paid to use their best judgment rather than popular sentiment to reach those decisions, even when it's unpopular. Holding a referendum on ending segregation in the 1950s in the South would not have ended segregation. An extreme example, perhaps, but what about a city budget? Why doesn't Donovan push for a referendum on the budget? Let the people decide whether they want their taxes and fees to go up and which services they want to cut.

My guess is that a referendum approving the streetcar would fail, largely because Donovan — who, not coincidentally wants to be the next mayor — and other opponents have been blowing so much smoke that it's hard for anyone to see the issue clearly.

As Rep. Gwen Moore noted on this page last week, a modern streetcar system — not the one Milwaukee had in the 1950s — could enhance downtown Milwaukee and make the city more attractive to businesses and young workers. That's a good thing. Similar rail systems are operating in other cities and have helped bring new development to places such as Portland. That could happen here, too, if the system is given the go-ahead to expand beyond its initial stage.

Milwaukee can walk and chew gum at the same time; it can improve its troubled neighborhoods *and* its downtown. It is not an either/or question.

Another vote on the project will be held Wednesday, and what's likely to happen is another delay followed by a February vote.

Maybe city planners and Moore and I are wrong; maybe the streetcar won't deliver (and I don't think it

will deliver much unless it grows beyond the current configuration). But I say let the people decide — through their duly elected representatives on the Common Council.

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You know those lovely parents on the plane who keep threatening their lovely and annoying child to settle down or else but never actually get to the "or else" part? That's kind of the relationship the state Department of Natural Resources and Milwaukee County have when it comes to the [Estabrook Dam on the Milwaukee River](#).

The DNR has granted the county another two-year reprieve to either remove the dam or fix it. This follows a 2009 DNR order to protect public safety by restoring the dam or removing it no later than July 2012, an extension to October 2012 and another to Dec. 31, 2014. County Executive Chris Abele's administration wants to remove the dam, which would be a lot cheaper than the renovation cost of \$2.5 million, and the \$160,000 annual cost of operating and maintaining it, but certain members of the County Board have fought that option. A lawsuit is also holding up things.

It's time to end this. I was intrigued by a "rock-shelf" option offered as a compromise last year, but if the only options left are demolition or repair, I say tear it down — and stop the "or else" game.

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