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Reckless Politics Risk Dane County “Brain Drain”

A Column from the Desk of Dane County Executive Joe Parisi

Recent news accounts have documented perspectives of some employees and their experiences while working for a couple of Dane County departments. Taken on the surface, some of these accounts are concerning. Let me be crystal clear - every allegation of misconduct or discrimination involving a county employee is taken seriously and investigated by an independent, racially diverse entity. If required, additional supports are offered by county attorneys or other outside counsel.

I think it's really important to say – your county government works incredibly effectively and will continue to do so. Like every work place, disagreements occur between managers and workers. Everything we've read in the news to this point stems directly from a handful of union leaders who don't see eye to eye on everything with their supervisors.

What's lost in that unproductive approach is the greater good that thousands of Dane County employees do every day in our communities.

Dane County has close to 3,000 employees, 450 more today than when I was first elected County Executive. Those employee's wages have increased 41% since I started in this job. We offered the first public sector paid parental leave plan in the region. Our employees benefit from the most accommodating work from home program around. We offer county employees a health insurance plan with no monthly premium cost, longevity bonuses in retirement and pay out unused leave balances in cash.

Because we treat our employees well we're able to hire some of the finest experts in their fields. They've brought the innovation that makes your county government work the way you expect.

We are the national role model on renewable fuel production. Soon we will be the first local government that's 100% sustainable. Other communities come to us to learn how

our lake clean-up efforts work so they can replicate our success. This work is made possible by brilliant, hard-working civil servants whose talent and expertise are in demand in this economy. Continued exploitation of the workplace tensions of some will result in a Dane County “brain drain,” brought about by short-sightedness and perhaps one another motivation that’s not been talked about until now.

After Governor Walker eliminated collective bargaining, Dane County was the only county government in Wisconsin to re-constitute a system that closely mirrored collective bargaining. We afforded our workers nearly all of the same flexibility they had prior to Act 10. Due to a recent legal case in Milwaukee County there’s increasing concern that some of these provisions are ambiguous enough that our county could be at legal risk. These provisions exist in our county employee handbook.

Shortly before recent news accounts about workplace difficulties started, I was presented with a series of potential changes to consider for this year’s handbook. For the first time ever I was asked to consider whether union leaders should have limits of how much union work they do while on county time. As you might guess, some were upset I was even asked to consider these proposals. It was shortly after this you started hearing about disagreements within certain county departments.

So like any disagreement, there are multiple – and sometimes even bigger issues to resolve. Everyone associated with county government owes it to the public we work for to resolve our differences in a constructive manner. We are tasked with doing the people’s work. And it’s time we all get back to doing it.