

Monday, September 20, 2021

To Members of Leelanau County Board of Commissioners:

County Commissioner Rick Robbins (District 1)
County Commissioner Debra Rushton (District 2)
County Commissioner William Bunek (District 3)
County Commissioner Melinda Lautner (District 7)

cc: County Administrator Chet Janik; County Clerk Michelle Crocker

Thank you all for taking a few moments to listen to the thoughts and concerns of a county resident related to the recent straight party-line vote to eliminate 2022 funding for the early childhood program by setting the millage to 0.00. This letter and the sentiments within are to be considered **on the record**.

I am confident you will be receiving significant correspondence and phone calls related to the relative merits of early childhood programming and the positive long-term benefits of these important and shared community investments. I am equally confident that you will not be swayed by these arguments and so I will not restate them here. I do wish however to appeal to you on the importance of pragmatism and logic when taking such considerably aggressive actions against the stated wishes of the voting public.

I appeal to you to consider the following:

Controlling for the Variable of the COVID-19 Pandemic

There have been comments and conclusions made that point to the unspent monies among the programming in question since it was passed in 2019. If there are concerns that the program is overfunded and/or not equipped to effectively deploy the funds since the first mills were collected in 2020, it is important to be pragmatic and control for the variables introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Planned early childhood programming, like every other aspect of our lives, has not been spared significant disruption by the uncertainty and instability of the spread of the virus. If there are concerns related to unspent monies, perhaps a formal review and action plan could appropriately address those concerns and surface the obstacles faced by the program administrators while not starving this voter approved program of funding. Families with young children – present and future – deserve better than a scorched earth budgetary maneuver that strips them of services lawfully endorsed by your constituents.

The Dangers of Myopic and Short-Term Thinking

Our rules and norms of governance are littered with examples of single actions taken in a moment of time, which set precedent with unforeseen consequences and effects. And often, those effects are not to the favor of the party who took the initial action. I appeal to you to consider what our local governance processes may look like in the years ahead if you choose to take this action which normalizes an overt disregarding of voters' will. The actions you take today, should they stand uncontested, set the standard for future county administrations. And those decisions may not be favorable to positions you take on issues and referendums. Putting aside for the moment your own opinions on the early childhood millage, how dangerous is it

for elected officials to take it upon themselves to decide what is right for everyone, when their constituency has already stated their desires?

Narrow Wins are Still Wins

I have also heard your proposal to defund early childhood programming is justified due to the millage itself being passed by a narrow margin of 99 voters in an off-year cycle. The narrow margin and the election cycle are undeniable facts – but they do not change the outcome. Narrow wins are still wins. We don't overturn the final scores of a football game because one team was coming off a bi-week or one of the starting quarterbacks was injured. This is no different. Coincidentally, Commissioners Robbins and Bunek themselves won by far narrower margins than those of the millage in question. This is the nature of our representative democracy and while close calls may be a painful disappointment or huge sigh of relief depending on your position, they are legitimate and must stand. In regards to the off-year cycle timing, low turnout is an issue among all political parties and an outcome you do not agree with is not an ethical, professional, or acceptable grounding for subverting the results.

In closing, I ask you to look at this issue more closely and reconcile the fact that the program was clearly and undeniably approved by a majority of voters, the millage has legal standing per the filing of the ballot language and election outcome, and that the programming the millage enables was launched during a terribly turbulent time. Please do not punish the children and families who so greatly need these services. Eliminating funding is a blunt instrument that harms some of the most vulnerable among our community.

The services offered via the early childhood programming are not replicated elsewhere – not in our schools, not in the health department, and not in the greater medical system. As a father of a 4-year-old and 1-year-old here in Leelanau County, I voted proudly to authorize these services for our community – the same pride with which I voted in favor of continuance of elderly services. We all do better when we all do better.

Thank you for doing the right thing, honoring the will of the voters, and leaving the early childhood programming millage fully intact for 2022.

With Regards,

Joe Mosher
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