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COUNTY EXECUTIVE DELAGRAVE'S 2021 BUDGET ADDRESS

As prepared for delivery

Mister Chairman, Mister Vice Chairman, Members of the County Board, Youth in Governance representatives, distinguished guests, and residents of Racine County:

To say this has been a challenging year would be an understatement -- look no further than the mask I'm wearing and the setup for tonight's meeting. The COVID-19 outbreak has upended everyday life and caused so much heartbreak, not only in our communities, but around the world.

Facing a pandemic is hard enough on its own. But this year has also brought an economic recession, a long-overdue reckoning on race, and even more political strife. All of us -- no matter our age, race, gender or political persuasion -- have deeply felt the impact of this turbulent year.

This budget address, naturally, looks ahead to 2021. However, we must be clear-eyed and recognize that the issues we confronted in 2020 will be with us for some time to come.

Throughout the past seven months, Racine County has risen to every challenge that has come our way, from the heroic essential workers on the front lines, to everyday residents stepping up and helping their communities through crisis.

With the budget proposal I am delivering to the County Board tonight, we seek to respond to the challenges of today -- to make progress and do right by our residents -- with the same grit and determination that has defined Racine County for generations.

Make no mistake: given the backdrop of a recession and so much uncertainty, the process to craft this budget was extremely challenging. Yet it was crucial to me that we protect our taxpayers, many of whom are already feeling the strain of the economic downturn.

Led by Brian Nelson and our Finance Department, we focused on fiscally-prudent measures to ensure taxpayer dollars were stretched as far as possible. We're tightening

our belts in the same way many of our residents and businesses have, like holding off on filling vacant positions and delaying many large capital projects.

Since I joined the County in 2003, I've been a part of 18 annual budgets. I think everyone can attest to my frugality – or what my wife and kids might call “cheapness.” But COVID-19 is a new challenge, and one that has particularly affected our residents' mental health. As we experience an increase in both the number of mental health placements and length of each placement, we are utilizing some of our reserves to make certain we can provide strong mental health services and address other COVID-related issues.

While we fully expect the tax rate to decline for the seventh straight year, we cannot simply repeat this same painful budget process year after year. Five years ago, we didn't face costs for enhanced cybersecurity or needed large capacity upgrades for 911 dispatch infrastructure. Body cameras for law enforcement alone costs hundreds of thousands of dollars. Of course, health insurance costs continue to rise – and the list goes on.

In early 2021, I will convene a two-day summit with County Board leadership and key stakeholders to chart a path forward for a more sustainable budget and to build back our reserves. We will explore every option – on both the expense and revenue sides – to ensure our County government can effectively serve our communities.

Still, we can't wait – and we won't wait – to make our County stronger.

We have listened intently to the discussion both locally and nationally on how to improve racial equity. We have looked inward on how we can do better as a County government. I'm pleased to share several updates tonight, beginning with the transformation of our Uplift 900 employment initiative.

For the last two years, Uplift 900 has made gains in improving access to family-sustaining employment in under-served City of Racine neighborhoods, helping contribute to record-low unemployment rates before the pandemic. Now, we want to build on this success and create a larger and broader effort.

Led by Pastor Melvin Hargrove, who I've named as Community Impact and Diversity Coordinator, our new goal for Uplift 900 is to better engage the community to ensure all voices – regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation – are at the table in local government decision-making. We want to make sure our policies and initiatives are inclusive and fair, and that we view our efforts through the lens of racial equity.

We've already deployed this focus on a major County project: our new youth justice facility. As we work toward breaking ground as early as next spring, addressing racial disparities is at the forefront of the design and planning.

This budget includes \$100,000 in race and equity training for key County staff, and \$53,000 toward a youth summer jobs program. We are also exploring public-private partnerships to address African-American home ownership, including neighborhood revitalization and rent-to-own opportunities in the City of Racine and across the County.

Any conversation about racial equity must include an honest look at ourselves. Over the summer, we analyzed the data and found that our diversity in staff leadership does not always match the diversity of the communities we serve.

We are committed to addressing this. Pastor Hargrove will spearhead an internal group that will examine ongoing community and County employee diversity goals. We have added Human Resources staff to focus on diversity hiring initiatives and establishing clearer pathways for career advancement. I am proposing increasing starting wages for positions including child support workers, Clerk of Courts staff, and corrections officers.

While the group of corrections officers at the Racine County Jail has grown more diverse, it's incumbent on me to create better career opportunities and help diversify the ranks of sheriff's deputies. Therefore, we are adding tuition reimbursement and placing greater emphasis on mentoring to help our corrections officers grow and advance.

Finally, I am excited to bring to the County Board a proposed ordinance to increase transparency, which I announced in my State of the County address and you reviewed earlier tonight. This ordinance strengthens the County's commitment to collect objective data -- devoid of racial and socioeconomic bias -- to better assess the impact of budget expenditures, staffing and other resources.

As we know, this necessary conversation around racial equity resulted after high-profile officer-involved shootings, including one just to the south in Kenosha.

Law enforcement officers have an extremely difficult job. I couldn't be prouder of our Racine County Sheriff's Office and the work they performed this year under incredibly challenging circumstances.

I especially want to salute their leadership of the Racine County Emergency Operations Center, which was activated on March 19 in response to the pandemic and has remained open ever since. Under the guidance of Captain James Weidner and Emergency Management Coordinator David Maack, the EOC has led the way to compile and distribute PPE, prepare a housing plan for essential workers, hospital patients and residents with special needs, assist with safe and smooth elections, and help direct needed state and federal resources to Racine County.

Of course, law enforcement agencies have room for improvement, just like we all do. In my budget, we allocate \$225,000 into a software solution that ensures the Sheriff's Office follows best practice guidelines and keeps up with legislative changes and training mandates, including in important areas such as use of force, officer-involved shootings and prisoner restraint. These topics are evolving and becoming increasingly complex, and it's crucial that both the Sheriff's Office and our residents are clear about standards for law enforcement.

This is the latest in a series of proactive measures that have been a hallmark of the Racine County Sheriff's Office. Sheriff Christopher Schmaling and his staff have been statewide leaders on a variety of fronts, from implementing body cameras, to adding life-saving NARCAN to squad cars, to limiting COVID-19 transmission within the jail.

We support our law enforcement. This budget provides more resources for our Sheriff's Office, including a \$375,000 increase for Tasers and body cameras with video management system that are fully compatible with the latest Bluetooth technology.

It's important to note the Racine County Sheriff's Office's budget is the second-lowest per capita compared to the eight counties closest to us in population or proximity – a great example of taxpayers getting the most out of their dollar.

The Sheriff's Office isn't the only county department protecting our security. Our Information Technology Department, under the leadership of Shuchi Wadhwa, has the crucial task of protecting our County government's cybersecurity. Under this budget, we funded an additional IT position focused on enhancing cybersecurity and protecting our digital infrastructure.

When I took office five years ago, I made upgrading our parks a priority. Since then, I'm proud of the major improvements we've made in parks from the west end to the east end of Racine County.

The most exciting of those upgrades is at the SC Johnson Community Sports Complex at Pritchard Park. As we continue building a true community facility with the help of private and public partners, we are thrilled to complete the new multipurpose stadium in partnership with Racine Unified and the Green Bay Packers. While the pandemic has most youth sports on hold, we cannot wait for our local teams to begin playing on the field next year!

At Quarry Lake Park, the revitalization continues. Under this budget, we will begin construction on a new venue that can hold weddings and other events. This space will replace a building that is nearly 50 years old and comes on the heels of a new beach house opened over the summer at Fischer Park.

I've included \$250,000 in the budget for initial design work for a new campground at Case Eagle Park in Rochester. And I'm very excited to allocate \$500,000 to complete the Rails to Trails-Route of the Badger through Sturtevant, Mount Pleasant, Yorkville, Union Grove and Dover. This investment – which comes from money generated from land sales, not tax dollars – is necessary so that we can leverage a \$1 million state grant to finish this bike/pedestrian path and great quality-of-life amenity for our residents.

The Route of the Badger is a key part of our infrastructure, and perhaps more so are County Highways.

This budget includes over \$3 million for road construction – the most allocated for roads in recent memory. This money allows us to complete Highway K from Overson Road to U.S. 45 and several key road repairs on county highways C, G, H, and W. In addition, I am committing \$350,000 in this year's budget to begin a two-year process to rebuild Highway P in the Town of Burlington. Design will be completed in 2021 so that a reconstruction can begin in 2022.

On two other projects, we were able to bring design work in-house, saving taxpayers about a half million dollars. It's important to note that many of these road projects are

moving forward due to significant savings realized from the Highway KR expansion coming in well under-budget.

Maintaining our infrastructure is crucial as we continue growing. Despite the recession, the County continues to see significant corporate investments from companies such as Amazon and ND Packaging, and new housing developments including Cornerstone Crossing in Waterford, Tivoli Green in Mount Pleasant and Gold Medal Lofts in the City of Racine.

To continue this momentum, I am creating a countywide planning commission next year. The goal is to bring together our municipalities to spur development throughout the county, update our 2050 comprehensive land use plan, and send a message to developers that Racine County and its communities are working together to bring high-quality housing and economic development projects to our area.

As I mentioned earlier, a key to good fiscal health is getting high returns on our investments. The County Board's approval of our new Performance and Analytics Division is a great example of investing a little to get a lot back.

In the past year, this division helped secure \$65,000 in funding toward public Wi-Fi, targeting low-income neighborhoods with high COVID case counts. They helped create a tracking system to efficiently distribute PPE to first responders. They provided food, household, and PPE and sanitation supplies to roughly 2,000 families in Racine and Burlington. They completed a wage study in-house that otherwise would have cost almost \$200,000. And that's just a small window into their efforts. Thank you to Travis Richardson and his team for their great work helping residents and taxpayers of Racine County.

Speaking of stretching the dollar, the Central Racine County Health Department has done tremendous work responding to the worst pandemic in a century despite limited resources. In partnership with the health department and its member municipalities, we have started the process of folding the Central Racine County Health Department under Racine County government – a move we strongly feel will lead to even better delivery of health services in a more cost-effective way. We look forward to working with the County Board to complete the transition by January 1, 2022.

Going forward, we will continue working to turn the challenges of 2020 into opportunities in 2021 and beyond. We are a resilient County full of inspiring, special, and extraordinary people. Residents can be proud that their county government reflects those traits.

I'm so grateful for my cabinet, our constitutional officers, and all of the nearly 800 Racine County employees, who have overcome unprecedented challenges this year to provide the high-level of services that our residents expect.

From our IT Department's hard work transitioning meetings and county services from in-person to virtual, to the Human Services Department's efforts reaching our most vulnerable population in need, this year has truly been a team effort across all departments, and I'm honored to be one small part of it.

I especially want to thank you, the County Board. As we see by the setup for tonight's meeting, this year has been difficult and disruptive for you as well. But I remain incredibly appreciative and thankful to work alongside you as a partner to weather these storms together.

Our task in the year ahead seems daunting. But instead of dwelling on the hardships of today, we will take the right lessons from 2020 so that when the history is written, it's seen not as an endpoint, but as a turning point. I know that with all of us working together, brighter days are ahead, and we will emerge stronger than ever.

Thank you, and may God Bless Racine County.

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