

October 4, 2005

## **WASHINGTON COUNTY GETS WACKY**

### **And: Wisconsin's Prisoner Problem**

Those wacky folks on the Washington County board have come up with a new and hilarious way to give away tax money. They are handing \$4.5 million to Cabela's Inc. to entice the company to build an outdoor goods mega-store. This is on top of the \$5.25 million the State of Wisconsin will spend on highway improvements and infrastructure. Why is this so silly? Let me count the ways.

First, Cabela's is getting a primo location, at the junction of Highways 45 and 41, which will give it access to a mother lode of customers in outdoorsy Wisconsin, where 700,000 people have licenses to hunt and 850,000 people have fishing licenses. Why do they need a subsidy to cash in on this huge market?

Second, Gander Mountain, a competitor of Cabela's, is considering locating just up the highway. But the company isn't asking for a subsidy. Why help one retailer over another?

Third, Cabela's has gone across the country demanding such handouts. Tax subsidies are critical to its expansion plans, one of its annual reports noted, "because they will allow us to recapture a portion of the costs involved with opening a new store." Why encourage this sort of civic blackmail?

Fourth, the claims for tourism are exaggerated. Supporters say the store will attract out-of-state customers. The only problem with this theory is that every state is getting a Cabela's. The company already has a store in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, one in Michigan, two stores in the Twin Cities area and one in northern Minnesota. Meanwhile, it has purchased land for a store in northwestern Indiana and is negotiating for a handout to build a store in the Chicago suburbs. That leaves a possible influx of a few lowans – those who don't go to Illinois, Minnesota or the smaller store in Prairie du Chien. Seems a high price to pay for the privilege.

Fifth, the economic impact is questionable. How many family-supporting jobs are ever generated by a new retail store? The real benefit, in terms of good-paying jobs, will occur in Cabela's headquarters in Nebraska, which will increase its payroll by \$3 million if the Washington County store is built, the company told the *Omaha World-Herald*.

Sixth, the legal pretext for \$4 million of the handout is absurd. Washington County is actually portraying this as an investment in a museum-quality display of taxidermy. Retired West

Bend businessman **Doug Ziegler** is suing the county, arguing that the animal displays do not constitute an educational or cultural contribution, as the county board claims. On the contrary, these stuffed animals are something Cabela's features to draw customers to its store, the same way a casino books top-name entertainers to bring more people to the slot machines. Cabela's is a commercial enterprise, not a museum, and any government representative who can't tell the difference needs a basic course in civics.

### **Wisconsin's Prison Problem**

An investigative story in the Sunday *New York Times* has found that the number of prisoners serving life sentences in America has risen alarmingly as more judges give sentences "without parole" and more parole boards refuse early release to other prisoners. About one-third of those lifers sentenced between 1988 and 2001 are in for crimes other than murder, including drug crimes (16%) and burglary.

Wisconsin has seen its population of lifers grow by 67% since 1993, faster than at least 17 of 40 states for which statistics were available. About 19 of 100,000 people in Wisconsin jails are now serving life sentences, compared to 4 in Indiana, 7 in Minnesota, 11 in Illinois, 19 in Iowa and 48 in Michigan.

This is but one example of how once-"progressive" Wisconsin has changed into a basically conservative state, with a far more punitive system than Illinois. That wouldn't have been the case 20 years ago, and it has consequences for taxpayers who foot the bill.

The United States has become an international island of old prisoners, the *Times* story noted. In European countries, even the most hardened murderer never serves more than 20 years. The reason for that is obvious to any criminologist: Most violent crimes are committed by younger people. As people age, they are far less likely to commit crimes.

One notable exception is the sexual predator, and there has been much controversy over how to handle their release, should it occur. But most criminals given a life sentence are unlikely to repeat a crime in their later years and should be considered for parole. An 18-year-old felon is an entirely different person at age 45, and a parole board should be able to consider this when making decisions. If not, we are dooming Wisconsin to ever higher tax bills to pay for jailing harmless geezers.

### **The Legacy of Ulice Payne**

You would have thought it was the second coming, given all of the attention by the *Journal Sentinel* to the Milwaukee Brewers achieving a .500 record. By definition, that means they've achieved mediocrity. Still, being average is better than being rotten, and the team does look positioned to do even better next year.

It's interesting that no one has commented on Ulice Payne's role in this turnaround. It was Payne who, as president, brought in general manager **Doug Melvin** and manager **Ned Yost**, and they have managed shrewdly. Certainly, it helped that owner **Mark Attanasio** increased the player payroll, but teams that spend money don't always do it wisely (including many Brewers general managers of the past).

Payne has taken some flak in this town for going public about his problems with **Bud Selig**, **Wendy Selig** and the Brewers ownership. You're supposed to be a team player and settle your disagreements privately. But Payne did a very good job of getting people excited anew about the team, prior to his exit. And he clearly picked a strong management team to run the club. If the Brewers do climb above .500 next year, some of the credit goes to him.

**Correction:** My story last week referenced a Journal Sentinel story that said Columbia St. Mary's was being asked to pay \$2.5 million per year in lieu of property taxes. The actual figure is drastically lower: \$2.5 million over 30 years. That strengthens my point: that the City of Mequon should consider asking for a higher payment from the hospital chain.

---

*Research assistance by Amanda LaBonar*

Contact Bruce Murphy at [bruce.murphy@milwaukeeemagazine.com](mailto:bruce.murphy@milwaukeeemagazine.com).

Check out other stories by Bruce Murphy and others in *Milwaukee Magazine*. [Send me a copy](#).