

Dear City Council Members,

I write to you to **provide an update** on budget negotiations, following meetings that took place over the weekend with some Alderman, as we all work to pass a budget that sets Chicago on stronger fiscal footing while protecting working families from regressive taxes and fees.

I do not have to tell you that many **Chicagoans are struggling in this moment**. The cost of food rose 30% over the past five years. Inflation and unemployment have both ticked back up, while the federal government makes life-threatening cuts to food assistance and Medicaid. Wards with majority Black Chicagoans and working-class Chicagoans have been hit with the steepest property tax increases in decades.

As James Baldwin said, “Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor.” In every corner of our city, I met single mothers over the past couple of months who leave work after a full shift to stand in line, enduring the cold for the basic necessities of food and clothing. As we approach the holidays, **families are worried** that there won’t be enough food to put on the table, nor anything to gift their children.

This is not hyperbole; this is the reality for Chicagoans today. This is personal for me because I come from that experience. I know that many of you can relate to that experience as well, either through your own upbringing or through the close relationships you maintain with your constituents. That anxiety is a heavy burden for too many, and it is up to us to do what we can at the local level to **meet the need without adding to the pain**.

That is why I have serious concerns about the **proposal to double the garbage fee**, which will directly and indirectly **raise costs every month for every single Chicagoan**. I also have strong objections to the proposal to **cut 5,000 youth jobs**, and to **sic debt collectors on thousands of poor and low-income Chicagoans** who have fallen behind on some of their utility bills.

These proposals by some members of the Council are not “shared sacrifice”; it is **only the poor who are sharing the sacrifice**. It is the same old tactic of balancing the budget on the backs of working people that we are working to transcend with this budget. Doubling garbage fees, cutting youth employment, and selling Chicagoans’ debt to the highest bidder **puts significant additional financial strain on those with the least ability to afford it**.

I also want to make it clear that I fully agree about doing everything in our power to rectify the mistakes of the past that leave our city in the current troubled financial position today. **We must set Chicago on a stronger financial footing**. The question is not *if* we need to address the city’s structural deficit, the question is *how* we generate the revenue to do just that.

The budget we put forward protects the working families of Chicago by raising revenue through new taxes on the largest companies in Chicago. We think this is a reasonable proposal, given the **tax breaks many of these companies received through President Trump’s OBBBA**. We continue to be open to compromising on the specifics of the tax on large corporations. However, the alternative proposal that was

sent to us outright rejected any consideration of a tax on corporations of any kind. Nor did the alternative proposal provide any legally or fiscally sound approaches to address the budget gap that would result from eliminating the Community Safety Surcharge. That is not a sensible starting point for negotiations and compromise.

Unfortunately, **some Alders are so adamantly opposed to any tax on corporations of any kind that they are willing to shut our government down over this issue.**

Our local government had some form of a **corporate head tax from 1973 all the way to 2014**. During that period, Chicago was transformed with substantial economic growth and hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Clearly, the corporate head tax was not a “job-killer” as opponents claim, but rather a sensible way to raise revenue that did not solely rely on working families.

In the name of protecting Big Business, some members of Council are proposing taxes that would effectively **push low-income Chicagoans out of our city**, which will have serious fiscal implications for our city’s finances. Pushing out working people by doubling their garbage fees overnight and siccing aggressive debt collectors after them would only **shrink our tax base and undermine our small business corridors**.

In short, **Chicagoans simply cannot afford some of these regressive alternative proposals**. That being said, we remain open and willing to engage in good-faith negotiations to pass a fair budget. We have looked at a number of possible iterations of the corporate head tax, including a **version closer to [the one proposed by many of you](#) in 2017** that would raise the per-employee contribution so that we could apply it to a smaller number of companies. We remain open to dialogue and negotiations to land a sensible compromise that raises the revenue that we need to maintain the services that Chicagoans rely upon.

The one point that I hope we can all agree on is that we need to do everything we can to **avoid a government shutdown**, which would negatively impact our City services, our ability to meet our contractual obligations, and our credibility with the public. The last time Chicago came this close to a government shutdown was during the **Council Wars when Ald. Burke and Vyrdolyak attempted to override Mayor Harold Washington’s veto** before compromising hours before the end-of-year deadline.

My hope is that we do not come anywhere close to that scenario. **My team and I are available to meet to discuss alternative proposals** at any time so that we can find a path forward. We welcome additional ideas, but time is running short, so we are not in a position to entertain proposals that are not legal, nor operational at this stage. We need **concrete solutions that a majority of the Council and the public can get behind**.

We did not choose the cards we were dealt. Chicago’s fiscal problems developed over the course of decades, and we will not solve them in a single budget. A budget is a moral document — Rev. William Barber reminds us that budgets show who we care about and who we are willing to abandon. And too often in this City’s recent history, we have seen budgets that choose corporations over people, protecting profits while communities are left to struggle and make up the difference.

What we can do is put our heads together to pass a budget that repairs the harm of disinvestment and prioritizes the communities that have carried that burden the longest, even as we confront our structural deficit.

I look forward to continued conversation to that end.

Sincerely,
Brandon Johnson