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FEATURED

## Mayor Paul Soglin, new City Council zero in on challenges including gun violence

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Madison Mayor Paul Soglin watches the proceedings during the first meeting of the new City Council on April 18. Soglin, entering the second half of his term, cites finance, racial equity and poverty as continuing priorities along with gun violence and other issues.

As Mayor Paul Soglin begins the final half of his current term with a just-elected City Council, recent gun violence has again elevated public safety as a serious challenge and possible stress point in the next budget.

In the past two weeks, the city has seen multiple incidents involving guns, Soglin and Police Chief Mike Koval sparred over Koval's public plea for more resources, and the council had a special discussion on gun violence.

Soglin, mayor for 14 years in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, and now six years into his current stint leading the city, said his priorities for the next two years will continue to center on city finances, racial equity and poverty.

But priorities also include violence, especially gun violence; the opiate epidemic, substance abuse and mental health; creating starter homes; dealing with crowded buses and supporting entrepreneurship, he said.

On the gunshots, a serious concern especially with summer coming, Soglin said he's working with the police, Dane County, community organizations and others on a "rapid response" designed to help individuals and families connected to gun violence.

The coming budget, he stressed, should prioritize neighborhood centers, libraries and community services, not police and fire stations and substandard roads.

"If we are talking about a healthy and safe city, we have to produce a nurturing environment where kids grow up to be healthy and supported and gangsters can't survive," the mayor said.

The council, which has tangled with the mayor on the budget since his return to office in 2011, has made public safety a priority, pushing forward the timing on a Midtown police station to this year and fire station for the Southeast Side to 2018.

New council President Marsha Rummel said basic security is a priority, not just public safety, but security in housing, food and health.

### A 'come-to-Jesus' moment

By most available measures, the city is "in pretty good shape," Soglin said, citing a growing and more diverse population, low unemployment, a rising tax base, new housing, business investment, improving academic results, and advances in racial equity.

But challenges are real, with public safety coming into sharp focus April 25 when Koval pleaded for city leaders and community activists to have a "come to Jesus" moment about crime problems following a night of "unprecedented" gun violence.

The State Journal asked several community leaders about challenges and priorities. They cited public safety and violence prevention; stabilizing and housing poor and middle class families; reducing racial gaps in education, unemployment and incarceration; resources for young children; retaining businesses; equity in business ownership; making the city more customer-friendly and having an easier development process; transportation; and public access to the lakes.

The city must execute a 15-point plan on violence prevention strategies approved last year, said Michael Johnson, president of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County. "If not, we are going to have a long, deadly summer ahead of us."

### 'It's going to take all of us'

After Koval's press conference, Soglin accused the police chief of campaigning for more department funds outside the city's budget process and threatened to take steps to "maintain control" of Koval's or any agency's budget if that procedure isn't followed.

Koval said he was surprised by Soglin's threat but stood by what he called his "clarion call" alerting the community to disturbing crime trends.

The council's discussion on gun violence Tuesday elicited serious concern but produced no clear signal of what it means for the 2018 budget.

"This is a big, big problem," said Ald. Matt Phair, 20th District, who helped produce the 15-point plan. "It's far more than about the police. It's going to take all of us."

The 2017 budget delivers \$400,000 for the 15-point plan by the Focused Interruption Coalition of community and faith leaders and elected officials that emerged in May 2016 after a series of retaliatory homicides involving young black men.

The initial effort will focus on those engaging in violence or returning to the community from incarceration, but the city will seek public input on concepts before issuing a request for proposals to nonprofits and others to use the funds, officials said.

It's "highly, highly unlikely" programs related to the plan will be underway before the fall, Community Development director Jim O'Keefe said.

### Officer staffing

It's still unclear if Koval will seek more officers when the budget process begins in the late summer.

The department's authorized strength rose from 350 commissioned officers in 1997 to 468 in 2017. The city added 32 in six budgets under Mayor Sue Bauman; 62 during eight budgets under Mayor Dave Cieslewicz; and 22 during six budgets under Soglin.

The seven officers needed for the Midtown station will cost \$674,712 plus a one-time cost of \$295,775 for vehicles in 2018. Adding another 13 officers throughout the city -- recommended in a city study -- would cost \$400,660 for part of 2018, with an annualized cost of \$1.1 million.

The city, Soglin said, doesn't need to raise police staffing as if recent gun violence is happening 24/7. But, he said, it must promote systems that don't need law enforcement so the kind of violence seen recently doesn't become as regular as it has in some cities.

The Rapid Community and Government Response to violence team, now taking shape, will focus on individuals and families most likely to have or use a firearm and "intensively work with them to keep them safe and the people around them safe," Soglin said.

The concept is to use community outreach to engage individuals involved and families impacted by gun violence, Deputy Mayor Gloria Reyes said. "It is not a police response. There's no investigative aspect to this at all," she said. "It's really a community response to violence."

The mayor's office will bring in community organizations and partners to discuss the initiative at a public meeting at 9:30 a.m. on Friday, at Fountain of Life Covenant Church, 633 W. Badger Rd., Reyes said. The current plan is to begin intervention using existing resources and collaboration by the end of the month, with an 11-member team discussing long-term strategies that will lead to a formal proposal in the summer, she said.

The mayor's office is exploring the possibility of a new violence manager position, Reyes said.

"This is very satisfying," Soglin said. "There are young people at a critical stage in their lives who have either made bad choices or about to make important choices that will affect the rest of their lives. This is an opportunity to provide them with a path to a future."

### 'A very austere capital budget'

Soglin said he hasn't made any final decisions on the 2018 budget but anticipates another difficult bout with the council.

"I'm going to first propose a very austere capital budget," he said. "What I do see in spending is a much greater focus on community services, at the expense of police stations, fire stations and roads."

The backdrop is rising concern about spending and borrowing. In 2017, the city's capital budget hit records for \$360 million in spending and \$169.9 million in authorized borrowing. Actual borrowing hit a record \$87.6 million last year; that figure for 2017 will firm up later in the year.

Debt payments have risen to the city's third-largest cost after the police and fire departments, city finance director David Schmiedicke said.

After years of contention, the most pressing capital initiatives for public safety seem settled. The 30,000-square-foot Midtown police station will be under construction later this year, and a recent resolution — supported by Soglin — seems to cement the Southeast Side fire station in the 2018 budget.

Under the resolution, the city will increase the size of the fire station to 20,000 square feet to add community rooms and testing and training space, bumping the construction budget from \$5 million to \$6.3 million. But the Fire Department will forgo a separate, \$6 million employee development center that had been considered.

The primary new cost drivers for the 2018 budget are the new police and fire stations and scheduled pay increases for city staff, Schmiedicke said.

Although the 2017 capital budget funds a relocated Pinney Library on the East Side, the Park Edge/Park Ridge Neighborhood Center and a new Bridge- Lake Point-Waunona Community Center, there are no further funds envisioned for libraries or neighborhood centers in the nonbinding, five-year capital improvement plan.

If Soglin wants more libraries and neighborhood centers, he'll have to propose them. "Alders are committed to safety. We're kind of firm," Rummel said. "(But) I think there's council support for neighborhood centers, libraries and services."

The mayor and council have tangled over road construction, especially Monroe Street. Roads have been a lower priority under Soglin, and there has been a jump in the percentage of substandard city arterial streets, from 10.2 percent when he took office in 2011 to 23 percent in 2016. The capital improvement plan envisions \$14.9 million for Monroe Street in 2018.

Still vulnerable is Soglin’s prized Madison Public Market. The 2017 budget includes \$1.2 million for the project, but the bulk of funding, \$11.8 million including \$3 million in borrowing and the rest from outside sources, is envisioned for 2018. “I’m still concerned about finishing the market,” he said, adding he’ll be assured “when we break ground.”

### ‘We have moved to a new era’

The mayor said he’s troubled by council actions, including pay increases and imminent first-time hiring of a chief of staff, which signal an evolution from a volunteer to a full-time council. A task force of citizens should underpin any significant change in governance, he said.

The city is growing and becoming more complex with more demands on council members, and a conversation on governance is needed, Rummel said.

Community leaders interviewed voiced hope Soglin and a more diverse council with four African Americans, its first Native American member and an even gender split can work together amid uncertainties about funding and policy at the state and federal levels.

“We have moved into a new era and our local officials are more important than ever and we are depending on them to lead us during these uncertain times,” said Ruben Anthony, president of the Urban League of Greater Madison.



Community leaders outline challenges, priorities

### More information