

Study compares cities' spending in Wisconsin

By ERIN KELLY Staff writer | Posted: Friday, August 12, 2016 4:00 pm

BELOIT — A new study shows Beloit municipal spending per person is higher than neighboring communities such as Janesville, Milton and Clinton.

City Manager Lori Luther said there are many factors behind the numbers that aren't measured or taken into consideration with a per capita study.

"I am very sensitive to the cost of services and to controlling those costs to the greatest extent possible," Luther said. "We want to be as efficient and effective as we can and always be thinking about the impact to taxpayers."

The Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance study reports the total operational spending per person in 2014 is \$1,031 in Beloit, \$833 in Janesville, \$644 in Milton and \$663 in Clinton. The operational figure is indicative of key government services such as police, fire and road maintenance, according to the study.

Luther said factors such as income levels, geography and density all contribute to the difficulty of comparing one community to another.

"It's really impossible to make a good comparison of communities based on per capita spending alone," Luther said.

One difference between Beloit and other communities is its force of professional firefighters. Many small communities have volunteer firefighters. Though the overall cost may be more for Beloit, in some instances the taxpayers receive better services and may save money based on the service provided, Luther said. She said Beloit's residents and businesses have reduced insurance costs, because of full-time firefighters who are in the station which reduces their response times.

Luther said this is an example of how Beloit may spend, but the overall level of service in Beloit is higher than many other communities.

When Beloit is compared to Wausau, which has similar demographics, population size and average household income, Beloit's spending is higher with Wausau's operational spending at \$896 per person.

Luther said it's still difficult to compare the two cities without knowing the level of service Wausau provides.

"The purpose of the City of Beloit's existence is to provide outstanding public service," Luther said. "The funds we spend are directly tied to the variety of services that are delivered based on

our population's needs and the public's expectations. The services we provide directly impact quality of life, public health and community safety."

Luther said there are many city services that directly contribute to safe and healthy neighborhoods such as drinkable water, sewage treatment, drivable streets, garbage collection, crime investigation and emergency responders.

Wausau has a lower 2015 property tax rate than Beloit: \$9.43 per \$1,000 of assessed value compared to Beloit's \$10.9566 per \$1,000 of assessed value.

Luther said Beloit has a higher property tax rate than others, including Janesville's \$8.4521 per \$1,000 of assessed value, because Beloit is a poorer community.

"A community with lower property values will have a higher tax rate to generate the same level of revenue," she said.

She said she's worked to reduce spending while maintaining high quality services since she was hired in June 2015.

Luther said she's worked extensively with Police Chief David Zibolski — and with others in different departments — to reduce spending in the police department and reorganize their ranks. Zibolski was hired as the chief in April.

"Upon my arrival, the police department was in crisis and new leadership was needed," she said. "The new police chief and I have worked cooperatively to better manage the department's finances, provide accountability and budget appropriately."

The general fund operating budget is \$30 million. Luther said personnel costs account for 80 percent of the city's budget. There are 335 full time and 50 part time employees or 350 full time equivalent employees.