

# DA opposes proposal to bring bail bondsmen back to Wisconsin

## State abolished the practice in 1979

By Breann Schossow

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Reintroducing bail bondsmen to work in the state will have a negative effect on public safety, Milwaukee County District Attorney John Chisholm said Monday.

Chisholm held a news conference in response to a provision in Gov. Scott Walker's budget-repair bill that would bring bail bondsmen back to Wisconsin. The Legislature's Joint Finance Committee passed the proposal 10-6 on Friday, and it was added to the budget-repair bill.

The Legislature still must vote on the proposal.

Chisholm was joined by state Rep. Fred Kessler (D-Milwaukee) and former Milwaukee County District Attorney E. Michael McCann, among others, in opposing the provision.

The proposal, if passed as a part of the budget bill, would not be the first time the state has had bail bondsmen, Kessler said. Wisconsin utilized bail bondsmen until the practice was abolished in 1979, making Wisconsin the fourth state to remove for-profit bail bondsmen, joining Oregon, Kentucky and Illinois.

The bondsmen could be paid at a rate up to 10% of the bonds provided to pay bail for prisoners and could have arrest powers to bring back fugitives who do not show up for their court dates.

Kessler said abuses to the system and corruption were major reasons for their removal.

One such concern mentioned by McCann was the type of people released with the aid of bail bonds. Judges are supposed to set fair, reasonable bail appropriate to the crime. That judgment, however, can be overridden by a bondsman, McCann said.

"If you turn that system back over to bail bondsmen, they are making ultimate decisions about the release of some very dangerous people," McCann said. "And that isn't good for the public."

McCann added, "Wherever the bail bond system goes, it appears corruption goes with it. We don't need that in Wisconsin."

McCann, who served as district attorney for 38 years, worked with what he called the "old system" for 16 years before bail bonds were abolished. The current system without bail bondsmen, he said, is far better.

"It's a higher quality of justice," he said.

State Rep. Robin Vos (R-Rochester), co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee, said it was added to the budget-repair bill as an additional tool to control costs. Vos had said last week that the proposal would help ensure defendants show up for court dates, making the court system more efficient.

Vos added Monday that not just anyone can be a bail bondsman - they have to be licensed by the state.

"It works well in 46 other states and the federal government," he said.

Vos added that he thinks constituents will be in favor of the provision although he was surprised that the district attorney's office is not.

"It's something I think everybody should support," he added.

Chisholm said he would like to educate and discuss the proposal with people on both sides of the issue.

"If they are going to move ahead on this legislation, let's have an informed, open, honest debate," he said.

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