

Investing in Wisconsin...For our Children, for our Future

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This week Senator Vinehout writes about the **impact of decisions made to send federal dollars back by the governor and legislative leaders**

. Those Federal dollars would have boosted the economy, created jobs and prepared Wisconsin for the future.

ALMA - I climbed aboard the tractor-driven wagon at the Pierce County Dairy Breakfast and nodded to two smiling girls clutching brightly colored balloons. Two families down was a little boy with tears in his eyes. His mother comforted him.

“Would you like my balloon?” I asked the boy. “Let me put the string around your wrist so you don’t lose it.” He stuck out his little arm and I slid the loop of string on the yellow balloon around his wrist.

At that point, his teary face turned into a priceless ear-to-ear smile.

I knew what every grandparent, parent, aunt or uncle knows: you’d do just about anything to get that reward of a big bright smile. We want the best for our children. We do a lot to invest in their future.

So when it comes to investing in our future why do some Wisconsin leaders have such a hard time?

I felt caught between the motivation to leave that young man a vibrant growing state to call home and a majority of colleagues in Madison very reluctant to invest in our state's future.

I recently received a memo from the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB) detailing the federal money Wisconsin leaders turned back in the last four years, effectively saying 'No thanks. Send this money to another state. We don't want it.'

The day before my encounter with the teary young man, I sat near a Chippewa Valley legislator at the Eau Claire Chamber of Commerce Legislative Forum. Representative Larson justified sending federal money back by saying "We've got to wean ourselves from taking federal money. The federal government doesn't have any money."

Never mind that the federal budget is over 50 times larger than the state. Never mind that 28% of Wisconsin's budget is already made up of federal money. Never mind that Wisconsin historically brings back less money than state taxpayers send to Uncle Sam.

The work of the nonpartisan LFB tells the story about what won't happen in our future because of decisions made in the last four years: 82 schools and 385 libraries won't be helped with new broadband after \$22 million in grant money was sent back. The first leg of high-speed passenger rail won't be built as the governor turned back almost \$800 million. Wisconsin doesn't have a statewide marketplace for finding low cost health insurance or independent navigators to help folks sign up for health insurance. The Department of Health sent back to the feds over \$33 million in grants awarded to the state.

Some 84,000 low-income parents would have BadgerCare if the state had taken federal dollars. Over the next three budgets over \$2 billion in federal funds won't flow through the state to health care providers to care for parents of lesser means.

In addition, had the state agreed with President Obama to cover these parents, over the next 3 budgets, \$500 million in state tax dollars would be freed up. This is money sorely needed just to continue to balance the state budget.

In another LFB memo, analysts report the state started 2014 with almost a billion dollar surplus; but is expected to start the next budget \$642 million in the red. In just the 2014-15 fiscal year, beginning July 1st, the state is estimated to spend \$500 million more than we take in.

Revenue estimates are dropping as the state's recovery stalls. The federal dollars turned away would have pumped over \$3 billion into our economy over the next 3 budgets. This is estimated to be equivalent to a 4% growth in tax revenue and over 15,000 new jobs.

What do we want for our children and our future? Will covering parents with low income save us money when they turn 65? Will high-speed rail ease the congestion and cost of repairing roads and improve our quality of life 30 years from now? Will broadband in our rural libraries and schools help the students living in rural Wisconsin in 2034?

I don't know the little guy's name with the yellow balloon, but I won't forget his smile. His future is worth working for today.

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