

Looking Forward to the Challenges of 2015

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Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about some of the challenges that will face us here in Wisconsin during the new year.

ALMA - There's something about the New Year that brings freshness and hope. Pain and loss are eased as the calendar turns to 2015. Opportunity and change await.

Farming taught me the importance of new beginnings. While the ground lies fallow, plans begin. The farmer sees the snow covered field. But in the mind's eye, the field is lush green. The weeds are few; the crop bountiful; the balance sheet in the black.

So begins the work of the people in 2015. Every bill is new (although many are recycled). Each bill begins the laborious process of committees and public hearings. Many legislators are new; returning lawmakers have new offices and some new staff.

Acrimonious campaigning is put aside. Even long-time opponents sound similar as they compete to deliver the best bipartisan speech.

Farming taught me the importance of having a plan; so in this spirit of fresh beginnings this week and next I'll offer my hopes and plans for the coming year.

The new session begins with the Governor's proposal for the two-year state budget. The most

important work of the Legislature will be the passage of this bill by midyear. The largest state-funded part of the budget will be K-12 education. What happens to schools will affect every community in Wisconsin.

Schools are the heart of our communities. Many who contact me are afraid they will lose their local school – or trade increasing property taxes as the only way to keep their school open. Fixing school funding is at the top of my 2015 plans. Many have offered answers including State Superintendent Tony Evers who proposed a new funding formula in his budget request.

“We must do something to help rural schools,” my Republican colleague said at a December legislative forum. “Don’t let partisanship stop a fix to rural schools”, directed the op-ed headline. I agree. The answers are before us. Let’s get the job done.

Fear of closing college campuses ranks right up there with the fear of closing local schools. UW Superior recently cut nearly half of its graduate programs including art, reading and library science. Suspended undergraduate programs include music with theater and computer science programs still under review. Campuses across the state are struggling with less state aid and the effects of tuition freezes.

UW campuses make our communities what they are today: a vital engine of progress humming along inspiring our youth and providing creativity, culture, and – in medical advances – life itself. We must invest in colleges and universities and plan to provide an affordable college education to the next generation of smart, hardworking youth.

Many people are concerned the New Year will bring additional challenges to local government. They fear new state laws will take away local ability, for example, to site and regulate sand mines. The state sends new –often unwanted – responsibilities to locals but keeps the resources and removes local powers.

Instead of removing local powers, let’s add to them in bipartisan action aimed at real local empowerment. Let’s provide local people with the resources to get the job done; to deliver services people want and need.

Since I've written about the Government Accountability Board (GAB) and its challenges in the New Year, I've heard from local clerks. One municipal clerk from Pierce County wrote that she found staff at the GAB very helpful. She thought they did a great job in the face of all the 'continual law changes'. So let's keep this nonpartisan watchdog and give them resources to get their job done.

Finally, let's make 2015 about real economic prosperity for all families. We know businesses locate in great places to live. Great places to live mean local decisions kept local, great schools and universities, and great parks, rivers and other places to play; all these state government can help locals.

So can you! Please share your thoughts because the best ideas for improving our communities come from the people who live in them.

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Wishing you and yours a Happy and Prosperous New Year!

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