

State Budget: Take Time to Learn and Express Yourself

Posted on Feb 09, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



This week Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about the importance of citizen involvement in the budget process. She provides background about the budget process and urges people to attend hearings, to write, call or send an email.

MADISON - “What people need to understand is that we are seeing this budget for the first time,” the Republican staff member told me. “There are a lot of things that need to change.”

Recently the Governor made public his proposal for the state’s two-year budget. The day following his speech a Senate page brought around a hand-truck load of budget documents.

When I visited my Republican Senate colleague, the staff had budget papers spread out over a desk and were trying to make sense of it – even as phone calls and emails from constituents were coming in.

As we scramble to find buried details, some constituents already were expressing themselves to lawmakers. The back-and-forth between constituents and legislators is a vital aspect of the political process, and input from citizens is never more important than during the two-year budget process.

We all know the headlines: \$300 million cut to the UW; cutting the UW loose from state government; lower funding for K-12 schools; statewide subsidy for private schools; state money to make a small dent in rising property taxes.

But it will take months to identify all the specifics.

That's where you come in. It's one thing to see a number on a page. It is quite another to understand the effect of a budget action across the state.

This budget, like in the past, contains hundreds of pages of non-fiscal policy. Said another way, the budget makes law changes unrelated to the money in a budget.

In the last budget, nearly 100 separate pieces of non-fiscal policy were passed. Some were things that might not have passed on their own – like taking away local powers to site TV and cell phone towers or to set protections from erosion on construction sites.

Time and partisanship further complicate our ability to find and react to pieces of the large budget bill. The only documents now available for lawmakers and the public are the summary prepared by the Governor's own partisan budget staff and the budget legal language itself in over 1,500 pages.

We all must wait for the work of the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB). Analysts are working hard to prepare a plain language summary of the budget including numbers and policy. The work is complex and time consuming. When finished, the summary will be nearly 500 pages. This document is the best single source about details that will affect citizens' lives for the next two and a half years – sometimes much longer.

As I learn information I will share details in columns and letters. I will hunt down details to put budget policy and fiscal changes in context. I will ask for LFB memos to provide a nonpartisan verified source. But LFB won't always be able to put answering my requests for data at the top of their to-do list.

After the LFB finishes its analysis of the budget, they begin writing memos covering details of the many budget decisions the Joint Finance Committee will ponder. These papers are very

useful. Members of the Finance Committee will have first crack at getting LFB to answer their questions (I am not on this committee).

During April I expect the Finance Committee to hold public hearings around the state. These hearings are often held during the day and can be a long drive away. I will be holding town hall meetings about the budget at more convenient times and locations.

Please take the time to learn how the state budget affects you and your family. I will make my town hall meeting locations public. If you want a personal invitation, let me know (877-763-6636).

Please express your opinions about the budget. Write, call, send an email – let your representatives know. Don't let past disagreements stop you from writing again.

Only about 20% of people contact their representative. But sometimes only one or two letters can change a bill. Telling your story about how budget decisions affect you and your community can make a real difference.

“If there were just 10 people in every congressional district who really pushed on an issue...we could literally change the world.” – Illinois Senator Paul Simon

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