

Looking Back on 2015

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This week, as the holidays draw near, Sen. Kathleen Vinehout does an overview of the issues about which Wisconsin constituents contacted her.

ALMA - Happy Holidays! While Santa is making a list of who is naughty and nice, I spent time making a list of what folks cared about enough to call or write.

I am always impressed by how many people take the time to become engaged in their government. “Democracy” is truly a verb for the 7,007 individual people who communicated with me in 2015. Many offered their opinion not once but several times. My office recorded a total of 15,811 contacts with citizens.

This year was a budget year. It was also the year the Governor ran for President. Both had an influence on the amount and type of communication I received.

People did not favor the Governor’s budget. Many wrote on several budget issues. Seven topics really stood out based on the number of contacts I received.

Most concerning, in terms of a common complaint, was the Governor’s proposal to dramatically cut back SeniorCare. The program helps elders of modest means afford prescription drugs. The Governor wanted to replace Wisconsin’s program with Medicare Part D. Over 800 people contacted my office to oppose this plan. Many of these people had never contacted me before on any issue.

No one contacted me in favor of the plan. The immense amount of citizen involvement against the proposal led legislative leaders to drop SeniorCare changes!

Deep cuts to the University of Wisconsin System troubled many citizens. Over 250 people wrote specifically about the cuts to the UW System. Not one citizen wrote or called in favor of the cuts.

Changes at the Department of Natural Resources riled 145 people enough for them to contact me specifically asking to stop the changes, which included eliminating the powers of the Natural Resources Board, cutting DNR scientists and the stewardship program. Citizen action did help restore the powers of the boards at both Natural Resources and the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. The DNR is now suffering under budget cuts to its programs. No one contacted me in favor of these changes.

Over 100 people contacted me to oppose changes in FamilyCare and IRIS. This issue stands out as one that got people really engaged. Many wrote impressive and personal snail mail letters. Some came to the Capitol in wheelchairs and with caregivers. Others came to one of more than a dozen town hall meetings I held on the budget. For many people this was the first time they became involved in the political process. I received no contact from anyone in favor of the changes.

Changes to education, including teacher standards, cuts to public radio and television and changes to the public open records laws rounded out the list of major specific issues people took the time to express an opinion. In every case, people expressed opposition to the governor's budget provision.

In past years, some people always wrote in favor of some budget changes. This year was exceptional in that I received very little contact in favor of any part of the budget. I suspect the Governor's run for President led to the ill-conceived proposals for which there was little vocal support.

On other legislative issues, the misnamed "Right to Work" bill garnered the most attention. Ninety three percent of over 300 citizens who contacted me were opposed to the bill. Next of

concern were changes to the campaign finance laws and the elimination of the Government Accountability Board (GAB). Ninety percent who contacted me were opposed to these two bills.

Some folks are surprised when I describe about half my job as “social work”. By that, I mean listening and connecting people with resources to help solve their problems. Over 100 people contacted me with significant personal concerns. Some of the issues we assisted people with related to BadgerCare, unemployment insurance, DNR permits or other parts of state government.

A big thanks to my dedicated Senate staff: Linda Kleinschmidt, Ben Larson and Beau Stafford. In addition, thank you all who contacted me this year. You make democracy work!

Sending you and yours fond Holiday Greetings!

Tags: Untagged