

Looking Back on 2013

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At this season of reflection, Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about the year coming to a close and the issues about which people contacted her.

ALMA - The Holiday season is upon us. With it comes the time for reflection on the past year. I always like to take time to look back on the work accomplished. One of my most important duties as State Senator is responding to concerns of the people I am honored to represent.

As I look back at the issues people expressed as their concern it is no surprise state spending was at the top of the list. In odd-numbered years, the Legislature debates the two-year state budget. State spending related to education and health care tied with concerns related to mining, including sand mining and opposition to gun control.

People are worried state money for local schools has been cut too deep. They overwhelmingly oppose the use of public dollars for expansion of private voucher schools. Many people agree the school funding formula needs to be changed and special resources must be given to rural schools and those with high numbers of students in poverty. This is why I wrote an alternative budget fully funded public education, changing the formula and eliminated the new money for private school vouchers and tax breaks.

Health care is a concern on the minds of many. Of the several hundred people who contacted me about health care, 100% wanted the state to take federal dollars to cover people with BadgerCare and did not want those who now have BadgerCare to lose it. People are very concerned Wisconsin rates are nearly \$2,000 a year more on average than Minnesota rates. I received many letters from those who were shocked at the amount they had to pay. They expressed outrage at the state not creating a state based Marketplace. This is why, for the third legislative session in a row I introduced a bill to create a Badger Marketplace.

Firearms and mining were other top issues of concern for people in western Wisconsin.

Nearly 4 out of 5 contacts related to firearms were opposed to increased gun control. Little legislative action was taken on this issue and I don't expect any in the near future.

Of those contacting me about sand mines, 85% were opposed to more mines. A similar number of people contacting me oppose the iron ore mine. In response to concern about the impact of sand mines on communities, I introduced five bills to lessen the worst impacts of sand mines. The bills require better public notice of proposed mines, require mines to be better neighbors and increase the number of inspectors making sure mines are not polluting the environment. Unfortunately none of these bills even received a hearing in 2013.

While statewide issues get a lot of attention, most of the legislation I introduced in 2013 was to help back home. For example, years ago the Village of Stockholm requested legislation to get state designation as a "premier resort area". This would help boost tourism and garner more tourist dollars. After years of introducing bills to accomplish this, this year we finally succeeded.

I hear from many people about lousy cellphone coverage. They are thankful for their home telephone service. But many large telecom companies are getting out of the landline phone business. This creates a big problem for people, especially the elderly and small business owners, who rely on their landline. This is why I introduced a common sense proposal to protect landline phones.

In our area, local control is sacred. We elect local officials to make decisions in the best interest of our communities. I heard from many people opposed to actions by this Legislature that take power away from local people. An example that hit close to home is Senate Bill 349 which nullified local sand mine ordinances and forbids local protection of water, air or the use of explosives. Fortunately, with overwhelming contact in support of local control, we've managed to stall this misguided proposal.

A big thanks you to my senate staff and interns. And to all who contacted me – thank you for the opportunity to serve! I wish you and yours a very Happy Holiday.

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