

Looking Back on 2016

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District

Monday, 19 December 2016 22:07 - Last Updated Tuesday, 20 December 2016 10:40

<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/wisc-dairy-farm-s5.jpg>



Sen. Kathleen Vinehout hopes to find common ground on the issues of concern to Wisconsinites. For the residents of the 31st Senate District, most of were related to water. People were also frustrated with the negativity of the past election cycle.

ALMA, WI - We settled into a deep freeze this past weekend. After a long glorious autumn, the third week of December brought frigid temperatures not usually felt until mid-January.

So I took time out from normal senator and farmer duties to reflect on 2016.

This past year was one of upset and strife in the political world. The insiders haven't sorted out all that happened this election cycle, but listening to folks in western Wisconsin I can say people are not happy with politics as usual.

I heard many stories of people motivated to vote for the first time. I wanted to learn how these voters might have influenced the election results. I visited a local county clerk's office and learned an amazing twelve percent of those who voted in Trempealeau County were new, first-time-registered, voters. In the city of Whitehall, 24% of all voters were voting for the first time. I never saw so many people coming to the polls for the very first time.

Overall voter turnout was lower than previous presidential years. Many voters decided no candidate was worth their vote and they stayed home.

Overwhelmingly, people say the campaign was too long, too negative and damaging to our community-minded spirit.

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As I reviewed 2016, water issues topped the list of concerns people shared. Many of you asked me to stop several bills related to water. Over 100 people were opposed to private ownership of local municipal water. No one contacted me in favor of this bill.



In some last minute Senate drama, the bill was set for a full Senate vote and then mysteriously removed from the Senate calendar, as leaders discovered they did not have enough votes to pass the bill.

A similar fate befell another water related bill. Nearly another hundred people asked me to oppose a bill that relaxed rules regarding high capacity wells. The concern was about the large amounts of water these high capacity wells draw from the ground and surface water supply.

Two different versions of the bill passed the Assembly and Senate. Because no conference committee of Assembly and Senate members was convened to reconcile the differences between the bills, the issue died at the end of the legislative session.

Access to the waters of the Mississippi River for ice fishing became a problem last winter. Locals who crossed the railroad tracks to ice fish experienced threats from “railroad” police. Ninety people called, wrote or created and signed their own petition to ask me to make it possible for anglers to cross rail lines without harassment. Such outcry led to several meetings with rail officials and promises by the rail companies to create safe passages for anglers.

Water and muck in the wrong place created angst for many people as they worked to clean up after floods. Digging out and repairing damage is ongoing. Locals are frustrated at the limited money available for rebuilding. A complete lack of state funds to clear out a creek in Gilmanton and a lack of money to build a temporary bridge in Shoepps Valley (both in Buffalo County) are two examples where state rules do not provide local help. In both cases, the state limits how much local officials can spend AND leaves them responsible for fixing the problem.

Repair of many bridges and roads are complete. Please join me in thanking the town and county officials who worked (and continue to work) so hard to keep us safe and traveling to and

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fro.

Many people wrote about ideas for new legislation, funding for schools, roads, and health care. I will cover these subjects and more next week as I look forward to 2017.

In an effort to mend the political divide, I encouraged healing in a piece I wrote the day before the November election entitled *Joining hands and Respecting Difference*. One reader, Kathy Peterson of Eau Claire, captured the unifying spirit we all seek when she wrote,

“I pray we can all learn to respect everyone as we work towards solutions for the common good. Thank you for your continuing advocacy for the people of Wisconsin and our entire nation.”

Thank YOU for the opportunity to serve you this year. May the peace and joy of the Season be with you.