

Legislative Season Brings Many Capitol Visitors

Posted on Mar 10, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



This week Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about recent visits from constituent citizen lobbyists who came to Madison to discuss a myriad of important concerns. These visits are a critical way for legislators to learn about issues of concern to their constituents.

MADISON - "I've never done this before," the young woman told me. She came to my Capitol office for the first time to talk about issues important to her and her profession. She was one of about two-dozen groups that recently visited.

People imagine a legislator's job as debating on the Senate floor. But much of my time is spent listening and learning. Here's a sample of visits from a single day.

My day started working with my staff to distill the important decisions of the state budget into a PowerPoint for use at Town Hall meetings. Budget choices include what happens to local schools, the UW, health care, local government, public safety, state parks, our environment, agriculture, roads and bridges.

Soon into my budget work, my staff interrupted saying, "There's a group waiting for you."

The first group of almost 100 employees and retirees represented a local utility. The group leaders shared several concerns including federal guidelines that called for a reduction in carbon emissions. They worried Wisconsin was not given credit for prior lowered emissions. After the leaders explained utility concerns, I invited employees to speak. Their most important issue was protecting local schools.

"I'm very concerned about the Eau Claire school district," a man shared. "I want my grandchildren to have a better education than my children, but how can the school do this with so many budget cuts?"

Back at my office I started adding up budget dollars spent on large road construction projects in Southeast Wisconsin. I was adding the third nine-digit number when my staff said, "The Optometrists are here to see you."

An independent optometrist from Eau Claire told me about her new business and the problem she was having with insurance companies. "They won't cover simple things I can treat, like pink eye," she said. "Instead patients are required to go to the large healthcare system. The patient stays there and doesn't come back to my office."

She and her fellow optometrists wanted support for a bill to provide, as they called it, 'patient equity and access to care'. The bill would allow optometric, chiropractic and podiatric (foot doctor) patients to choose their own doctor.

Shortly after this meeting I was visited by a nurse from Eau Claire who talked about creating a new law for independent nurse practitioners. Mid-level providers are a growing field. Research and patients alike support independent practice for nurse practitioners and certified nurse-midwives. But the law is slow to keep up with changes.

She also explained problems with a shortage of nurses and injuries to nurses in the workplace.

My next visitors were quite familiar with the job of citizen lobbyist. The Kwik Trip employees joked with me - "It's Groundhog Day" - as they told me for what seems like the 6th time about big companies trying to repeal the Unfair Sales Act.

You might think of Kwik Trip as a big company but the La Crosse-based company is small potatoes in a big world. They are firmly behind protecting the mom and pop gas stations from

unfair competition.

As the Kwik Trip folks left I hurried to another hearing room where nursing home administrators expressed concerns about budget cuts. “We just can’t continue,” one administrator said. “In 10 years, three nursing homes closed in our area,” said another. “We are competing with Wal-Mart and McDonalds for workers and we have to pay our workers more,” said a third. “Wisconsin must invest in caring for our elders.”

As I got back to my office, an Eau Claire man visited. He was helping the Amish keep their homes. Because of their religious convictions and culture, some Amish don’t follow laws related to plumbing, electricity and smoke alarms. The man shared stories of Amish being evicted in subzero weather. The loss of their home was devastating.

It was now quite late. I turned back to my desk. Waiting for me were finishing touches on health care legislation, the Department of Health Services budget briefing and an invitation to a Constitutional Officers reception.

I didn’t get far on my budget math, but I did benefit from the knowledge gained on issues of concern to my constituent citizen lobbyists.

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