

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Tuesday, 06 June 2017 08:05

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MADISON - In the next few weeks, state lawmakers are voting on how Wisconsin spends money over the next two years. The choices legislators make will affect our communities and our lives.

Lawmakers are working off a spending plan submitted by the Governor earlier this year. Changes have already been made to his proposal.

For example, the budget writing committee removed much of the new money for the University of Wisconsin System. Big spending cuts in the last budget forced, among other things, a reorganization of UW-Extension, which may leave local communities without their own Ag or 4-H agents.

This year, the Governor's budget returned about one-sixth of that cut and ties the increase to new "performance" standards. However, majority party lawmakers cut that increase roughly in half and disapproved a small decrease in tuition.

Every dollar spent in the budget is a choice. Not funding the UW System may be a choice to

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finance another tax change for some businesses. Lawmakers are pushing to get rid of the business personal property tax that provides revenue to local governments.

What would your choices be for state spending? How might we spend the same amount of money but make different choices.

I tackled this question in writing an alternative to the Governor's budget. I focused recently on the General Fund budget – where most of our tax dollars go.

To break down the choices, it's helpful to remember the vast majority of state tax dollars go to fund health, K-12 education, technical colleges & the UW, local government and corrections. These five programs are most directly affected by general fund tax changes. For example, tax breaks result in less money for schools.

Those who deliver services in all five of these areas would tell us spending has not kept pace with inflation. Past budget cuts had serious consequences, such as teacher shortages, nursing home closures, loss of UW professors, and prison lawsuits. In addition, an aging population, more mental health and drug addiction problems, and increasing childhood poverty are straining our capacity to respond.

Over the past six years, Wisconsin spent hundreds of millions in new business tax credits. Yet legislative audits show little evidence of anticipated results. State and national economic statistics demonstrate Wisconsin's new private sector job growth trailing a majority of states. Local businesses report workforce shortages.

Every dollar spent in a budget is a choice. What choices could we make to address problems facing the state?

We could make technical and two-year UW colleges more accessible for students who might not otherwise get post high school training. In my alternative budget, I create a program to provide free tuition for Tech College and two-year UW Campuses. Use federal financial aid first. Then eliminate the remaining financial barriers. In addition, let us fix the UW System. Return the

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dollars lost, keep our county Extension agents, and retain professors at our world class UW campuses.

Reducing just one tax credit would allow for elimination of tuition for Wisconsin students at our technical and two-year UW colleges. Is this a trade-off you'd make to solve our workforce needs?

To fix public schools, let's eliminate the statewide expansion of private school subsidies. In addition, take the new school money the Governor put outside the school aid formula and put it through a new formula. Childhood poverty, struggling rural schools, special education needs, and many other school problems are addressed in the new aid formula proposed by State Superintendent Tony Evers. Positive changes the Governor chose to ignore.

Addiction recovery, increasing mental health provider payments, caring for our elders, and disabled (and those who care for them) and prenatal outreach are all changes I choose to make in the health budget. Moving administrative functions in-house rather than out-sourcing those functions to private consulting firms would cut costs by thirty percent. Taking federal Medicaid expansion opportunities would save state dollars AND cover 79,000 additional people with BadgerCare.

Other choices I would make to general spending include investing \$100 million in broadband expansion and putting a half a billion dollars in the state's savings account. All these choices are possible without spending more dollars.

Every dollar spent in our state budget is a choice, which makes the budget a reflection of our values. What choices would you make? Take opportunities to let your voice be heard!