



Chris Danou's Capitol Report The 2013-2015 Budget Needs Improvement

Last week, the Joint Committee on Finance voted to send Governor Walker's biennium budget to the Assembly and Senate for a floor vote. The budget is roughly four months in the making and in recent weeks has been the major topic of focus in Madison. I'd like to take a few moments to share some areas of concern, particularly private school vouchers, health care, taxes and some non-fiscal items.

As I've been out talking to folks, one topic that keeps coming up in discussion are private school vouchers. This program has been expanded statewide and is funded by taxpayer money so parents can send their children to a private school. Consequently, many communities are likely to see property tax increases as well as cuts to local school aid. This will be especially felt in rural areas and across Wisconsin. With an increase of per-pupil voucher spending of \$7,000 and only a \$150 increase for public school students, we simply cannot afford to be spending money meant for public schools on the unaccountable, private voucher school program.

Another area of the budget that hurts taxpayers is health care. Under Governor Walker's leadership and the Republican majority in the Assembly and Senate, Wisconsin has punted the health care ball to the federal government. The Governor deferred implementation to Washington and as a result, the federal government is setting up our health care exchange versus doing it ourselves. There are also financial implications with this decision. By not accepting federal money to expand Medicaid, taxpayers in Wisconsin will pay \$120 million more to provide health care to 84,700 fewer people. This will likely lead to increased emergency room visits that force taxpayers to foot the bill.

The 2011-2013 Budget made historic cuts of \$1.6 billion to education in Wisconsin. That cut was not only unprecedented in Wisconsin, but it was also the highest cut to education in the nation at that time. After two years of those unprecedented cuts, it looks as though Wisconsin has a surplus that will lead to a tax cut for most people. For a family making \$50,000-\$60,000 a year, this tax cut would give them an additional \$2 per week. I know every little bit helps, but for \$2 a week we could have reinvested money toward the things we rely on most, such as schools, roads and health care.

One of the non-fiscal policy items tucked in the budget would re-open the commercial bail bond system in Wisconsin. The practice has been outlawed since 1979 but will start again with a five-year pilot program in Dane, Kenosha, Milwaukee and Racine counties. Professionals that provide services in the criminal justice system every day are opposed to this unsafe and profit-motivated system. Rather than allowing judges and commissioners to make release and bail decisions, the bail bond system allows individuals to be free while awaiting trial if they can only afford 10 percent of their bail. If an individual jumps bail, the bond agencies send "bounty hunters," who are not required to be trained in professional law enforcement practices to apprehend the "fugitive." As a result, this can potentially endanger others in the process. Is this the kind of job creation Wisconsin needs?

The economic outlook for Wisconsin is nothing to celebrate. We are 44th in the nation when it comes to job growth and creation, and we are 49th in our six-month economic outlook. It is clear that we need to have a more clear and long-term vision in order to move in the right direction. Unfortunately, the budget doesn't properly address things like education, health care and job creation to help Wisconsin get back on track and start moving forward.