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STATE SENATOR TWENTY-SECOND DISTRICT

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Sen. Bob Wirsch: This Budget is a Wasted Opportunity

Madison – Sen. Bob Wirsch (D-Somers) issued the following statement after voting against passage of the 2021-2023 budget bill crafted by the Republican-controlled Joint Finance Committee (JFC):

“With the expected \$4.4 billion in additional revenue we’ll have coming in, this budget provided a rare opportunity to address so many of our most serious needs and priorities. Unfortunately, my Republican colleagues chose instead to go the same old route – cutting taxes for the rich.

The budget should have invested in our kids by providing school districts with all of the resources they need, including finally reimbursing special education costs at a fair level. Instead, the additional money put into K-12 education was so small that it put \$2 billion in federal education funds at risk. This budget funds education at less than 10% of the \$1.6 billion increase that had been proposed by Governor Evers, including more than \$700 million more for special education.

The budget should have invested in homelessness prevention and mental health programs. Governor Evers had proposed more than \$70 million to fully fund programs that had been recommended by the bipartisan Wisconsin Interagency Council on Homelessness, chaired by former Republican Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch; he also called for \$46.5 million in student mental health aid. Instead, the budget commits just \$1.2 million to programs combatting homelessness and \$12 million to student mental health aid over the next two years, shameful decreases.

The budget should have allocated \$15 million to update the state’s 50 year old unemployment claim processing system, as the Governor proposed. The wave of new unemployment claims last year resulting from the Covid pandemic would have been difficult for any system to keep pace with, but our outdated computer system never stood a chance, resulting in an unacceptable backlog of claims that left some families income for months. My office alone helped more than 700 UI claimants. Republicans took every opportunity to blame Governor Evers, while the truth is that former Governor Scott Walker and the Republican majority were warned way back in 2014 that the system was likely to crash under a rush of new claims, yet did nothing. Now they’ve stripped funding for the upgrades from this budget.

The budget should have provided \$9.75 million to help establish the Kenosha Innovation Neighborhood, which would serve as an economic and workforce development hub for the entire region. Governor Evers recommended this funding in his proposal, but again Republicans said ‘no’.

The budget should have reflected the will of the people of Wisconsin. JFC held four public hearings on the budget, in various parts of the state and virtually; according to committee records online, 442 Wisconsin residents either testified or registered in favor of Governor Evers’ Badger BounceBack Budget proposal; just fifty-two testified or registered against. Yet the Committee started off their budget work but gutting some of the most popular and important components of the proposal and made substantive changes, mostly for the worse, throughout.

This budget should have been transformational for people of Wisconsin. With once-in-a-generation financial resources, we had a real opportunity to truly make life better for so many of our friends and neighbors. Republicans squandered that opportunity, so I had to vote ‘no’.”