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2>Sen. Risser Offers Wise Words About Budget

The Capital Times :: EDITORIAL :: A8

Thursday, October 25, 2007

John Nichols

Don't look to Fred Risser for incendiary language regarding the failings of the legislative process. The fourth-generation state senator who is now the longest-serving legislator in the United States - having served continuously as a member of the Assembly and then the Senate from 1956 to today - speaks of the legislative process in the respectful terms of one who sees himself as a guardian of the public trust.

As the last of the old-school Wisconsin legislators, who thought it their duty to rise above partisanship and ideology in order to set a higher tone for the public discourse, Risser always chooses his words carefully. So, when the senator says that he was "disappointed with a number of aspects of the new budget agreement," you can bet that it's an understatement.

But the grandson of the man who served as Robert M. La Follette's floor leader in the state Senate that passed some of the most significant reforms in Wisconsin's history - including measures that freed up the political process with open primaries and ended corruption in the civil service - still tried to find something good to say about the uninspired budget that was finally passed by both houses of the Legislature this week.

"Compromises were made, some of which were very difficult to accept," began Risser. "Fortunately, the state Senate was able to fight off many of the extreme cuts proposed by the Assembly Republicans, including those that would have harmed state and municipal employees and drastically cut the University of Wisconsin System."

The Madison Democrat added, "The budget we'll forward to the governor funds our public schools and affords children in Wisconsin with the basic right of health care as a result of the governor's BadgerCare Plus program. The budget will spend \$30 million on smoking cessation and prevention programs. I am also pleased that the Homestead Tax Credit will remain available to 81,000 low-income residents who would have lost that benefit under the Assembly Republican budget.

"This budget invests in the University of Wisconsin and includes a vital expansion of financial aid to help keep the dream of a college degree affordable for middle class, working families. We were also able to fully restore funding for Wisconsin Public Radio and Television.

"Further, a number of important building projects were enumerated for the UW campus, including the School of Human Ecology, Memorial Union theater wing renovation and Union South replacement, and the Chadbourne and Barnard residence halls.

"The budget also provides investments in renewable energy and biofuels and expands the Stewardship Program, which is crucial to helping

Wisconsin protect its scenic beauty and ensure the long-term preservation of recreational lands."

Risser's assessment puts the best face on a budget that came too late and was too compromised. He voted for it while recognizing severe shortcomings, including the failure to close corporate tax loopholes that have been exposed in shocking detail and the scrapping of an attempt to enact domestic partner benefits. And he did so for a good reason.

The mess that Gov. Jim Doyle and legislative leaders made of the budget process needed to come to an end. Voting for the budget, even in the lamentable form that it finally took, Risser explained, "will give us an opportunity to move forward and address the many other state issues (that remain) pending."

Risser's right. It is time for legislators to move forward - in keeping with the state's motto - and to try to salvage something of value from a session that to this point has been a deep disappointment to those who know enough of Wisconsin history to expect more of our current leaders.

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