

# Debate over the budget continues: The facts don't support Republican rhetoric

By Kathleen Vinehout

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"We played the cards we were dealt," my colleague shared. "We really didn't have a choice." He was referring to his vote to support the state's two-year budget.

The story goes, "The state is broke. We had a \$3 billion deficit. We had to make tough decisions. We had to cut education, universities, technical colleges, local governments, services to the disabled and seniors. We had no choice. We had to put the state back on a sound financial basis."

This sounds adult, even heroic and a little self-sacrificing. There is a small problem: The facts don't support the rhetoric.

If the state was ever broke, it was two years ago. The national economy was losing 700,000 jobs a month. In Wisconsin, we had a \$6.6 billion deficit. State revenues were falling like a rock as we sank into the worst recession since the Depression of the 1930s.

This year, jobs are coming back. State revenue is on the upswing. We started the year with \$1.5 billion in new estimated revenue; in May, economists added more than half a billion in new estimated revenue.

So with all the new money, why all the turmoil? Why the draconian measures? Why the rollback of longtime Wisconsin traditions? Why the attacks on teachers and public employees this year when two years ago we fixed a much larger deficit, balanced the budget and met our responsibilities without the heated rhetoric and without tearing the fabric of our communities?

The answer lies in the choices made by our governor and the Republican majorities in the state Senate and Assembly. The numbers in the budget signed by Gov. Scott Walker last week tell the story.

This budget spends quite a bit more than the last. Programs the governor and Republican leaders don't like - I don't know any other way to say it - public education, universities, technical colleges, local governments - are cut \$1.23 billion. Programs the governor and Republican leaders like are increased over \$1.6 billion.

In addition, Republican leaders buy more than \$200 million in new tax decreases, adding up to more than \$2 billion in tax breaks over the next 10 years.

That doesn't sound to me like the state is broke. It doesn't sound like there was "no choice." It does sound like a lot of bad choices - choices I would not make and choices I don't think most people in the state would make.

Budgets are a plan for the future. Budgets provide a vision and reflect our values. This budget makes historic and drastic cuts in local schools, job training, universities and local government. The budget ties the hands of local officials, forcing them to cut services people need and leading to layoffs, closed programs and big changes in our schools.

Those choices clearly tell us what our leaders value. What they think is important to the people of Wisconsin.

This budget does not pay bills coming due. The budget restructures hundreds of millions of dollars in debt, not to gain a lower interest rate, but to completely avoid the payments.

This postponed debt, according to the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau, will cost the state nearly \$90 million in interest over the next 20 years. Financial analysts warn this additional debt could adversely affect the state's bond rating - meaning potentially even higher interest costs.

This budget combined with other bills passed this session creates substantial long-term commitments in lost tax revenue.

Finally, the budget moves large amounts of money from one fund to another. There are 12 separate fund raids in this budget. In all, more than \$400 million are raided from one fund to another. The bulk of this money comes out of the state's general checkbook leaving less for schools and local government.

One place the money ends up is to pay for roads. To finance new construction, a one-time transfer is made. Road construction projects continue for many years. But commitments to construction were made without regard to the next budget. This leaves the next budget with a Transportation Fund deficit in cash and needed bonding of more than \$900 million.

The governor and Republican leaders say they solved the state's financial problems. But instead they spent more, postponed debt payments and left a deficit for future budget writers.

And the cuts to education, technical colleges, universities and local government come at a price. Someday, Wisconsin will wake up and realize we needed to invest in education.

I will leave it to my Republican colleagues to tell us about the programs they are spending all the extra money on and why they have felt it necessary to take the budget ax to public education, our universities and local governments. Why they made the choices they made.

Now more than ever, wise citizens must beware of rhetoric. One thing every political candidate learns in candidate training 101 is how to craft a message and spin a story.

My advice to those weary of the spin: Look at the deeds. Look at the results. Look at the numbers. Follow the money. Don't be distracted by words.

*Sen. Kathleen Vinehout (D-Alma) represents the 31st Senate District. She has crafted an alternative budget, which can be found at her website, <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/sen31/news/>*

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