



Updates from the Capitol:

How Good Bills Die

Dear Friends,

This past week at the capitol has been an absolute flurry of activity. Most days are quite full for a first-term legislator, but this past week was even busier than normal thanks to the bustle and activities associated with [Superior Days](#), which celebrated its 40th anniversary this year. One of the most common sentiments shared with me by Superior Days delegates was, “thank you for being here and being so available to listen.” My response every time was, “I can’t imagine missing the chance to connect with my constituents!” Showing up is the easiest part of the job, and it’s the very minimum that we should expect from our elected officials.

It was particularly wonderful to have students from Douglas and Bayfield counties join me in my office, explaining what they need from the state. I shared with them that taking the time to come to the capitol—or visiting with their reps when they’re in the district—truly does make a difference. This effort is particularly effective when people share their personal stories, as one student did when she said that as an artist and musician, she fears that if we fail to address public school funding, those critical programs will be the first things cut. Of course she’s right.

I told her that the power of sitting face-to-face is that it takes a special kind of person to look someone in the eyes who is sharing what they need your help with, only to respond with disregard or dismissiveness. And yet those two words seem to define much of what happens in Madison.



Bayfield County Students Visiting for Superior Days

In my ongoing quest to try to help us all be more effective change makers, I'd like to continue to focus on some of the structural barriers that exist in the legislature that prevent meaningful bills from being passed. These dynamics are fundamentally undemocratic, and we have to change them if we want to solve big problems in our state. In town halls and other gatherings at which I've spoken recently, I've used the issue of postpartum [Medicaid expansion](#) as an example of what's wrong with our system, and so I won't go into details here. But if you want to learn more about how—despite the support of nearly every single one of the 132 legislators in this state— Rep. Robyn Vos is single-handedly blocking a bill that would expand healthcare access to new moms, please read more [here](#).

Unfortunately, there are many other examples of undemocratic norms in the legislature that I could highlight, and it's not just in the Assembly. Last session there was a dynamic in the Senate which Lucio explains as follows:

Senate Republicans created an internal rule called the "Rule of 17" that essentially made the votes of all Senate Democrats, and by extension the votes of their constituents, useless. For any bill to receive a vote on the Senate floor, it was required to have the support of at least 17 out of 22 Republican Senators such that it would have a majority with or without Democratic support. Functionally, this meant that a bill could be supported by up to 27 out of 33 Senators (16 Republicans and 11 Democrats) and still fail.

A bill could pass the Assembly and could have the support of 82% of Senators, but unless 17 Republican Senators intended to vote yes—something they would figure out in meetings before the floor session—they would ensure the bill would never even get a vote on the floor.

You might assume that this is just a thought experiment. What bill could possibly get enough support that enough Democrats *and* enough Republican Senators would vote to pass it were

it not for this rule? My guess after six weeks on the job is that the number is much higher than most people would think.



Sporting Coalition Briefing

One example that happened last session centers on [expungement](#), an issue that Lucio's former boss, Representative Goyke, cared about passionately. In most states in the country, if you commit a non-violent crime as a young person, once you have completed your sentence you can petition the court to have your record expunged, meaning it won't show up on a records search if an employer or landlord does a background check, and you wouldn't be disqualified from certain occupations. States around the country have decided that a non-violent mistake in one's youth should not haunt them forever, and a judge should have the discretion to determine whether they're eligible for a second chance. But in Wisconsin, expungement eligibility is determined at the point of initial sentencing. This is clearly a problem as a judge might reasonably prefer to wait until the defendant has completed their sentence to see whether expungement is appropriate.

Rep. Goyke's office worked tirelessly on changing this law. According to Lucio, they "compromised with Republicans, offered massive concessions, had dozens of meetings, and spent months of effort" to win over enough Senate Republicans to receive a floor vote. But because five senators put the appearance of being "tough on crime" above the needs of Wisconsinites, the "Rule of 17" prevented the bill from even getting the chance to be voted upon in the Senate. That is, despite overwhelmingly passing the Assembly, and enjoying the support of as many as 123 out of 132 legislators—93% of the Legislature!— the bill failed to make it to the Governor's desk. Needless to say, this is not democratic.

Why would Senate Republicans create the “Rule of 17”? Why would Rep. Robyn Vos prevent popular legislation from reaching the floor for a vote? My sense is that the work we do as legislators is thought of as existing in two distinct categories: 1) the work that will help improve people’s lives; and 2) the work that will give one party an edge during elections. Too often, political party leaders prioritize the latter over the former. If expungement were allowed to pass, Democrats would “get a win” and certain Republicans fearing a primary challenge would look “soft on crime”, and apparently that can’t happen. If Medicaid is expanded at all, not only do Democrats win on an issue that matters to our party, but the idea that providing access to healthcare for those in need is legitimized. Meanwhile, new moms who need healthcare can’t get it and a person who made a mistake when they were young and never broke the law again, has an immensely harder time getting a job or housing. (To see a moving and passionate defense of expungement, consider viewing [this video](#) of Rep. Goyke’s final floor speech.)



Fmr. Rep. Goyke Speaking on 2024 AB 37

Maybe Democratic leadership would pull the same moves if we were in the majority. But now we really are in a thought experiment since, thanks to gerrymandering, Democrats haven’t held a majority in the Senate or Assembly for over 15 years, so it’s impossible to say. If we did act so brazenly against the public interest, I and many of my colleagues would vehemently protest.

We must end the practice of putting politics over people. We must create a legislature filled with people who are committed to the idea that good policy is the only politics that matters. We must have the courage to do what is right and let the political cards fall where they may. There are plenty of individual Republicans who have good ideas that I’m happy to support

and vice-versa. But nothing will change until the current majority leadership in the Legislature, with their “winner-takes-all” approach to governing, is replaced. Until then, continue to put pressure on your representatives to do the right thing.



Superior Days

Updates in brief:

- Governor Evers will deliver his budget on Tuesday, February 18 at 7pm. I'll be scheduling listening sessions around the district in the coming months to solicit your feedback.
- We have a floor session on Wednesday, 2/19 at 1pm. Follow along on [wiseeye.org](https://www.wiseye.org).
- To keep up with legislation that I've co-authored or co-sponsored and any votes I've taken, visit [my legislative page](#).
- I'll be in the district the weeks of February 24 and March 3. Please be in touch if you'd like to set up a meeting or if there's an event that you think I should attend.
- I'll be at a community organizing event at the Washburn Public Library on February 26. (Potluck at 5:30pm, speaking / Q&A 6-7:30) and at White Winter Winery in Iron River on March 6 at 6:30pm for a townhall.
- There is an important primary election on Tuesday, 2/18 for local school board races and the State Superintendent Race. See what's on your ballot [here](#) and make sure you have a plan to vote.

As always, if you need any help at all, or if you want to share your view on happenings in the district or legislature, please be in touch.

Sincerely,

Angela



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