



March 16, 2012

End of the Session Column

If you hired someone and they walked off the job before it was done, wouldn't you be upset? Unfortunately, that's what the Wisconsin State Legislature has just done. When we adjourned a few days ago, we quit for the year. That's right, the legislature, a full-time body, will not meet again until January unless a special session is called. The legislature has walked away from scores of bipartisan bills that would create jobs, improve our schools, help fix our economy and make government more transparent.

Are you upset? I am.

You pay us to work for you, and we owe you our best efforts. I will continue to attend meetings, work on constituent concerns and develop the proposals I plan to introduce when we return to session next year. However, with unemployment still unacceptably high, schools struggling to make their budgets this upcoming school year and, health care costs draining budgets, we can't wait nearly a year to address these concerns.

Here's why we should continue to work. The Governor set a goal of creating 250,000 new jobs in our state by 2014. I think that is a goal we should continue to aim for. Unfortunately, the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics has just reported that Wisconsin lost 12,500 jobs over the past year, the worst record in the country. Wisconsin is the only state among our neighbors to have lost jobs over the past 12 months.

One of the centerpieces of the Governor's jobs agenda – mining in northern Wisconsin – did not pass. A bipartisan proposal that would have met all the mining company's requirements, while preserving environmental protections, was rejected by the leadership of both houses. That's not how bipartisanship is supposed to work.

Various proposals for job creation grants and tax credits remained stalled in committee. My proposal to expand a job training program, which was requested by Western Tech and wouldn't have required any additional funding, was passed unanimously by committee. However, the Assembly leadership refused to schedule it for a floor vote.

Having served for nearly a decade as our County Board Chair, I'm very concerned about bad choices at the state level resulting in higher taxes at the local level. One example was the state budget provision that prohibits county highway departments from cooperating with each other and with municipalities. It has already raised costs by hundreds of thousands of dollars statewide by, forcing counties to buy their own equipment instead of trading services with their neighbors. I co-sponsored a bill to repeal this law, but it didn't make it out of committee.

Another issue of critical importance to local governments, libraries school districts, colleges and universities is WiscNet. This program allows governmental entities that pool their resources to provide more affordable internet service to their members. A bill to extend the program died in committee before we could bring it to a floor vote.

Either the Governor or our legislative leadership should call us back, and not let us leave until our work is done. After all, that's our job.