



The [statewide COVID-19 website](#) is a one stop shop that consolidates information from state agencies, and provides up-to-date information and guidance regarding COVID-19. DHS has also offered information on their website on [How and Where to Get Tested](#).

If you're not busy, please make a call, send a card, or write a letter to someone you know who lives alone or may need assistance.

Bless each of you during this difficult time of uncertainty and suffering. Take good care!

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Wisconsin Legislature Convenes



The Wisconsin Legislature convened for the first time in 265 days Monday to recognize the election and inauguration of newly elected and reelected legislators, select new officers such as the Senate President, Chief Clerk, and Sergeant at Arms, and to establish a calendar for the next two years.

A resolution to reopen the State Capitol to the public was also brought up, and we had a chance to discuss some of the issues from the previous session.

See the next section for more detail.

Session Happenings

In general the first day of each session is considered a ceremonial affair, focused on the inauguration of the senators who are beginning their new terms. However, due to the ongoing pandemic and other recent events, some of the actions taken held more significance than they would under different circumstances.

You can view the [full proceedings on Wisconsin Eye](#).

Certification of Election

Although many concerns have been raised about the validity of the most recent election including from my colleagues in the Senate and the Assembly, there were no objections made to the certification of election for the 16 members of the State Senate who were inaugurated on January 4th. It would be inconsistent of an elected official to insist that many of the votes were made illegitimately or that the entire election was illegitimate, to then take office based on their performance in the same election.

Looking Back at the Last Session

The proceedings were also significant because it was the first time that Senators have had an opportunity to speak on the floor of the Senate since the Virtual Senate Session that took place 265 days prior. I felt that it was very important to speak about the events of that session, due to the inappropriate way that Senators, including myself, were treated during the Virtual Senate Session.

Here are some of excerpts from my remarks from the floor of the Senate:

Yesterday we all watched the Packers and the Bears game, and they started off by having a set of rules for that game. If you can imagine that football game without a set of rules--I feel that's what happened on April 15th when we had our last virtual session.

From an institutional perspective, a black mark has been placed on the Legislature. I feel the rules of a virtual session were used to prevent the minority members like myself and the Senator from the 4th, even from attending, asking questions, raising points of order. Any time we would vote, we could only vote, we couldn't say anything else. That's an embarrassment of this body.

The Senate as a body must be accountable to the people that we serve.

The events of the Virtual Senate Session on April 15th, were conducted in such a way that the public could not see when requests to speak were being made, and that was used to ignore members of the Senate during debate on the only piece of legislation that was taken up to address the pandemic. The effect that this has is to ignore the needs of the hundreds of thousands of people that those senators represent. Such actions can never be allowed to happen again.

The Calendar was Voted On

Last session, I voted against the floor period calendar for the legislature, because it included Veterans Day as a session day. I felt that this should be changed to honor the members of the Legislature who have served in our military, and to give them an opportunity to observe that day that is so important to our nation's veterans. I didn't think it was right for us to treat Veterans day as just another day of business.

I didn't know it at the time, but my decision to vote against the calendar had implications for the way that the Legislature handled the Coronavirus pandemic. Here are more of my remarks from the floor that explain the situation:

Last year I was one of 5 people that voted against the floor period calendars, and I'm glad I did, because this body has become very difficult partisanshipwise. the people who voted for the resolution--the calendar-- it was used against them, because we weren't in session for 264 days. the Speaker of the Assembly basically said, "Well, the Democrats voted for this floor period, so they said these are the days we're going to meet in."

If you look at the number of days last session, I think it was about 80 days, and we were in maybe 17. Last year we were in maybe 3 days of session. I remember being here with the Senator from the 27th for a special session, and he and I were the only ones. There was not a single Republican here.

I will not vote to approve a calendar that was written without any input from the minority in order for it to be used against me later when an emergency is taking place, but leadership doesn't want to take action. There is no reason that the Legislature could not have acted during the last 265 days, and I will not support the floor period calendar being used as a shield to hide behind.

A Resolution to Reopen the Capitol

The final order of business was a [Joint Resolution](#) that was introduced without notifying any members of the minority. Normally, the agenda for a session includes of the provisions that will be acted on and is presented to the members of the legislature with at least 24 hours to consider and review the content. This time we were not allowed to see the resolution until it was handed to us at our desks.

This is a negative signal at the beginning of session and indicates that the majority party will disregard decorum and the standards of the Senate in order catch the minority unawares.

In response to the joint resolution, I and my Democratic colleague Senator Lena Taylor offered a [floor amendment](#) to require that all persons wear a mask and observe social distancing while in public areas of the Capitol building, excepting for medical circumstances. The amendment was killed along party lines.

I am hopeful that the new session will bring opportunities for both parties to work together and solve the many unresolved issues that our state is facing, but I do not think that will be possible if the parties are trying to hide information from each other and catch each other off guard.

Two competing COVID relief packages for Wisconsin

In addition to the [Governor's COVID-19 relief package](#) that he provided to the Legislature last month, the Assembly Republicans have now produced [Assembly Bill 1](#): their own bill to address the ongoing pandemic which received a public hearing in the Assembly Health Committee yesterday. You can [watch the hearing on Wisconsin Eye](#).

Both bills contain a significant number of provisions, targeting issues related to vaccination, unemployment, health insurance coverage of COVID-19 related treatment, and the parameters for an ongoing public health response, but they also have some significant differences.

So far, my Republican colleagues in the State Senate have not indicated whether they will support either version of the relief package.

This [article in the State Journal](#) describes the process and some of the major differences between the Governor's and the Assembly packages.

DWD says it has cleared the Unemployment backlog, issues persist for those claiming benefits

On December 30th, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development [announced that it has reduced the backlog of Unemployment claims](#) to levels that were seen before the influx of claims related to the pandemic. It was also announced that DWD's Transition Director, Amy Pechacek has been appointed to the position of DWD Secretary. Although claims are now being addressed within the standard timeframe, issues persist for claimants.

Due to a delay in the signing of the recent federal COVID-19 relief package at the end of last year, the federal unemployment programs of [Pandemic Unemployment Assistance \(PUA\)](#) and [Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation \(PEUC\)](#) lapsed, and those who filed regularly for these programs in Wisconsin were left with no way to file their claims. These programs were reapproved in the new legislation, but we have not heard whether this technical issue has been resolved. [Read more.](#)

I have heard from several constituents who have been asked to now repay some or all of the benefits that they had received as a result of an error on DWD's part in issuing their benefits. For people who have lost their way of life in the course of the pandemic, this is like having the rug pulled out from underneath them in a moment of crisis. We must get to the bottom of how this happened.

In addition to these issues with the processing of benefits, many of the claimants who have needed to rely on unemployment during the last 9 months [may be faced with a tax bill that is very different from previous years](#) due to the fact that unemployment can be taxed as income.

The Wisconsinites who needed to claim unemployment during the pandemic turned to the state in a moment of crisis, and many of them have endured long waits, confusing instructions, and unjustified denials that they have needed to appeal. We must find a way to make this process easier for them.

Changes to the Paycheck Protection Program in the new COVID relief bill

After an imperfect first round of loans from the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce have pushed for revisions that were included in the new round of stimulus.

Many of the changes were made to allow use of funds to be more flexible for businesses to respond to the particular circumstances of the pandemic in ways that had not been necessary in the past.

The new program also includes a lower maximum award, so that fund may be distributed more widely with less funding going to larger businesses.

For a list and description of some of the changes for the new round of PPP, check out [this article](#).

Enjoying Wisconsin winters through the years

As we break out the shovels, mittens and sleds, here is a [collection of images from the Wisconsin Historical Society](#) looking back at the way that Wisconsinites endured and enjoyed winters of the past.

One classic way that families made the most of snowy conditions in Badgerland was with toys like the [Mirro Sno-Coaster](#), a type of sled invented in Manitowoc in 1955.

| 608-266-8535 |

Twitter | Sen.Carpenter@legis.wi.gov | Facebook

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