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STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

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Senator Marklein Statement on Government Accountability Board Reforms

MADISON— State Senator Howard Marklein (R-Spring Green) released the following statement today regarding legislation passed by the Senate to reform the Government Accountability Board (GAB):

“I believe the reforms we passed today will make the GAB more transparent and fair without completely dismantling an agency that has provided strong election-related services to our state. The changes we made in the Senate are a good compromise and address my concerns about the original proposal.

“There are some things that the GAB does well and there are some things that are not working. We maintained the pieces that work and reformed the elements that needed improvement. We still have an agency that will oversee elections and political activities in Wisconsin, but this agency will be improved by including more bi-partisan stakeholders in decision-making with a new leadership model.

“The GAB has served our municipal and county clerks well throughout several election cycles. They have provided solid resources, training and support that our local officials find invaluable. We wanted to maintain this part of the agency.

“However, the current leadership model of the GAB has serious flaws. For example, the agency is not viewed as nonpartisan. Its leadership is making decisions based on one-sided information. There is very little oversight and virtually no transparency. We live in a politically-charged state and our self-imposed watchdog agency has failed to maintain nonpartisanship as demonstrated by their conduct. If the agency were truly balanced and nonpartisan, we would not be making changes today.

“There are several nonpartisan agencies in Wisconsin government that are deeply respected because they are clearly nonpartisan. Their leadership and staff are held in high regard because they take nonpartisanship seriously and serve both parties equally. The Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB), the Legislative Council and the Legislative Reference Bureau (LRB) serve the entire legislature fairly. We do not know which way any of their leadership or staff lean politically and they strive to keep politics out of their work. We respect these agencies for their steadfast nonpartisanship. The GAB should be as respected as these other nonpartisan agencies; but it is not. We need to fix it.

“In order to make thoughtful reforms in an agency that is deeply political, we needed to find a way to create balance. The Senate version of reform maintains two positions for retired judges and adds equal positions for partisan appointees from both parties. This new bipartisan board will then hire a Commissioner to coordinate their operations and he or she will be accountable to the board.

“I fought for this structure because I believe it will create an environment where both political parties are represented in collaboration with the experience of two judges and a commissioner who is accountable to all members.

“As ideas and issues come before the board, members from both parties will be able to provide information, ideas and contrasting viewpoints to create a higher level of discourse. The retired judges will be able to apply their experience and investigative nature to balance both sides. Without the judicial members, I feared that we would create gridlock on the committee. This new structure creates balance while elevating transparency and fairness.

“The bottom-line is that maintaining status quo for the GAB was not acceptable. We needed to find a way to maintain the things that are working well while we make changes in order to insure that everyone, from both parties, are treated fairly by a model that includes more information, discussion, transparency and oversight. I believe we have achieved this goal.”

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