



SENATOR

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2017-18 LEGISLATIVE SESSION UPDATE

Wirch Leads Effort to Save Taxpayers from “Dark Store” Loophole

More and more, big box retail chains are taking advantage of legal loopholes to avoid paying their fair share of local property taxes. As a result, leaders from communities big and small all over the state have spoken out, urging the Legislature and Governor to act on a fix before residential property taxpayers are left to shoulder even more of the tax burden.

The **so-called “dark store”** loopholes allow big chains to have their property assessed like vacant stores rather than thriving businesses, in some cases cutting their property tax bills in half; that tax burden is then shifted to residential property taxpayers, who can’t take advantage of such loopholes and are already paying about 70% of the total property tax revenue. Authored by Senators Roger Roth (R-Appleton) and Duey Stroebe (R-Saukville) and Rep. Rob Brooks (R-Saukville) and introduced in June 2017, Senate Bills 291 and 292 would close these gaps that currently allow big retailers to avoid paying millions of dollars in property taxes. Both bills have received bipartisan support; they even passed the Senate Revenue, Financial Institutions and Rural Issues Committee unanimously. However, in large part due to pressure from Wisconsin

Manufacturers and Commerce (WMC) and other big business groups, Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau) and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester) **have refused to allow them to be voted on in either the Senate or the Assembly.** Democrats in both houses made attempts to bring the bills to the floor to be debated and voted on but were shut down by Republican leadership.

With legislative Republican

leaders refusing to act, I’ve shifted my efforts toward Governor Walker. I authored a letter, co-signed by thirty of my colleagues in the Legislature, calling on the Governor to hold a special session on the dark store legislation. Despite my best efforts, not a single Republican member of the Legislature would sign on to the letter.

These bills are about fairness. It’s unfair that big businesses can take advantage of a gap in the law to avoid paying their fair share of property taxes, which pay for our community schools and municipal services that we

all benefit from. It’s unfair that hardworking, taxpaying families will be forced to pick up the slack. Without action, the League of Wisconsin Municipalities estimates that property taxes in Pleasant Prairie will rise 17%, or about \$892 on average per home, as a result of the dark store loophole, and property taxes in other parts of Kenosha and Racine Counties would likely increase by hundreds of dollars per year, as well. Join me in making your voice heard.

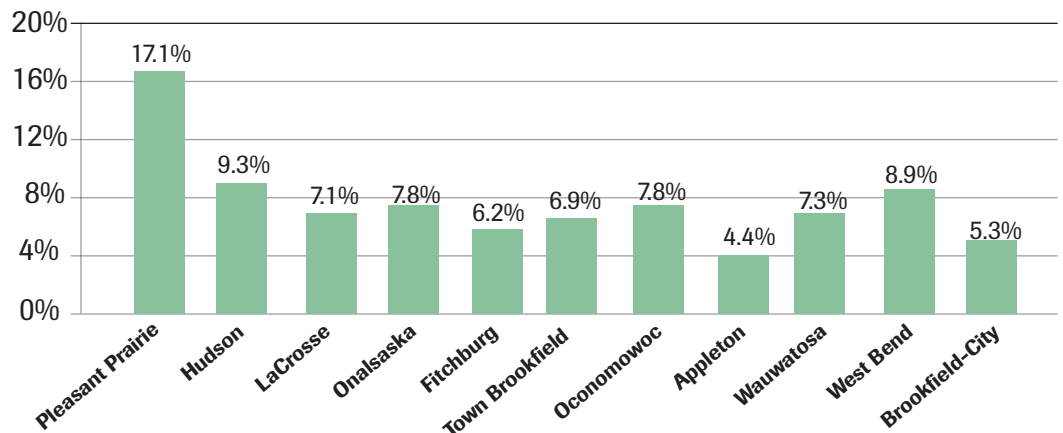
Contact Governor Walker and tell him to take action to fix the “dark store” loophole.



TAX SHIFT TO RESIDENTIAL

POTENTIAL PROPERTY TAX INCREASE IF DARK STORE STRATEGY AND WALGREENS LEGAL DECISION ARE FULLY IMPLEMENTED

Presumes 50% value reduction of commercial properties at risk of reduction by use of tax avoidance strategies legitimized by the dark store approach or the Walgreen decision



Contact Governor Walker and ask him to fix the “dark store” loophole.

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SENATOR ROBERT WIRCH • WISCONSIN SENATE DISTRICT 22



Rollback of Wetland Protections Puts Us All at Risk

The interests of the powerful big business lobbyists once again took precedence over the will of the people and the preservation of our resources recently, as Assembly Bill 547 (AB547), a further erosion of protections for state wetlands, was passed by the Republican majorities in both the State Senate and Assembly.

AB547, authored by Rep. Jim Steineke (R-Kaukauna) and Sen. Roger Roth (R-Appleton), would allow developers to fill wetlands without a permit from the state Department of Natural Resources, in some cases. Experts have said that passage of the bill would likely lead to the filling of tens of thousands of acres of wetlands in the state; an estimated 6,000 acres in the Kenosha and Racine areas alone are at risk.

The bill faced strong opposition from environmental, conservation, outdoor recreation and sportsmen's groups, which recognized the impact that a further loss of wetlands will have on our water quality, wildlife habitats, and flood prevention and control. This is at least the third piece of legislation to allow significant rollbacks of wetland protections under Governor Scott Walker, and we have already lost half of the wetlands that were once found in Wisconsin. According to state climate statistics, many areas of Wisconsin have experienced increased precipitation in recent decades. The loss of wetlands, combined with increased development, will make some areas more flood-prone. This has already begun to happen in parts of the state, as evidenced by increasingly frequent and devastating flooding in the last few years.

The authors of this bill chose to pit development and progress against conservation and environmental concerns. It doesn't have to be that way. Everyone agrees that development is important for economic progress, but there are better ways. Responsible economic development is possible when we balance the interests of big business with the valid concerns of sportsmen and conservationists.

Wirsch Bill on Unclaimed Life Insurance Benefits Passed by Legislature

This session I was excited to work with some of my Republican colleagues to protect families from insurance companies that refuse to pay life insurance benefits, and I'm happy to report that the resulting legislation has been passed unanimously by both the Wisconsin State Senate and Assembly.

Senate Bill 274 (SB274) will require companies providing life insurance policies or annuity contracts to compare their records against Social Security's "Death Master File" at least semiannually to determine whether a policyholder or annuitant has died and then take reasonable steps to contact the beneficiary and pay out the benefits. A segment last year on 60 Minutes highlighted the fact that life insurance companies nationwide were sitting on billions of dollars in unclaimed, unpaid life insurance benefits.

When I first heard about this issue on 60 Minutes, my jaw hit the floor, and I knew we had to do something. This bill is the result of a lot of hard work, and it's a great example of the good we can do when we work together.

Twenty-five of the country's largest life insurance companies have recently settled with both individual states and unpaid beneficiaries for more than \$7.5 billion, and thirty-five more are under investigation for failure to pay out benefits which have been paid for by policyholders.

A number of states have recently enacted similar laws, including Illinois, Florida, West Virginia and New York.



Attend One of My Listening Sessions to Share Your Thoughts

I hold frequent office hours, or what I call "listening sessions", which provide me with an opportunity to speak with and hear from community members in a comfortable, relaxed setting, often at one of our local libraries. It helps me better do my job as a legislator to know what is on the minds of the people in my community, and it gives people an opportunity to seek assistance with state agencies or programs.

I held dozens of listening sessions during the 2017-2018 legislative session, and I will continue to do so because, as an elected official, it's very important for me to stay connected to the people that put me in office. Keep an eye on the local news or call my office for details about my listening sessions in the future.