



PATRICK TESTIN

STATE SENATOR

Op-Ed: 2019 The Budget's Impact on Rural Wisconsin

Since I was elected in 2016, I've fought to be a strong and effective voice for the 24th District, and that includes being an advocate for rural Wisconsin. I've been proud to work with my colleagues like Reps. Nancy VanderMeer (Tomah), Scott Krug (Rome), and the late Ed Brooks to advance bills in the Rural Wisconsin Initiative that have worked to improve rural health care access, connect more Wisconsinites to the internet, and incentivize teachers who come to work in our schools.

The 2019 budget makes several important investments in rural Wisconsin including a bi-partisan agreement to expand broadband funding. Last budget cycle, I worked with Sen. Howard Marklein (R-Spring Green) and Rep. Romaine Quinn (R-Rice Lake) to expand broadband investments in Wisconsin by nearly \$23 million - including \$7 million for TEACH grants. I was glad to have the opportunity to build on that work this year by supporting the Governor's bi-partisan \$44 million expansion plan. In the 21st century, broadband is infrastructure, and it's important that rural Wisconsin is connected if we're to ensure equal access to opportunity.

We also sought to help struggling farmers through this budget. Over the last decade, dairy farmers in particular have been hit hard by a host of issues including low commodity prices and poor weather conditions. This budget includes a major provision that invests in the future of Wisconsin dairy and in the farmers who have made dairy this state's calling card. Sen. Howard Marklein (R-Spring Green), Rep. Travis Tranel (R-Cuba City), Rep. Rob Summerfield (R-Bloomer), and I worked on a bill to create a Dairy Innovation Hub housed at the UW-System. This hub is intended to help grow farm businesses, improve land and resource stewardship, develop superior animal health and welfare, and enrich human health and nutrition. Through the development of new products, we hope to be able to open new markets from which our farmers can profit.

One way for farmers to diversify their crop portfolio is to explore growing hemp - and many are looking into this option. As Rep. Tony Kurtz (R-Wonewoc), Sen. Lena Taylor (D-Milwaukee), Rep. Dave Considine (D-Baraboo), and I continue to work on the Growing Opportunities Act - our follow up to last year's hemp bill, we were pleased to see the inclusion of funding for hemp program positions in the budget. We will continue to work with the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection to ensure that they are able to manage this program as it expands with the goal of once again making Wisconsin number one in the nation in hemp production.

Local roads were also a budget priority. Overall, the budget contains \$320 million for state highway rehabilitation. The budget that the legislature passed also included \$156 million more for local roads, including \$90 million for the Local Road Improvement Program (LRIP). Unfortunately, the Governor chose to veto \$15 million from the LRIP program. The remaining \$75 million is available as one-time grant money for counties, cities, villages, and towns.

There were also some missed opportunities in the 2019 budget. Two bills that I authored to aid rural Wisconsin were included in amended form in the legislature's version of the budget, but were eliminated



PATRICK TESTIN
STATE SENATOR

during the line-item veto process.

The first bill would have created a dental scholarship program for students who agreed to practice in an underserved rural area after graduation. Graduates seeking to practice in Monroe, Adams, Jackson, Portage, and Waushara Counties would have been eligible, and passage would have gone a long way toward improving shortages in those counties. Although it did not pass in the budget, the bill is scheduled for a hearing in the Assembly this month, and I will continue to work toward its passage.

The second bill is the Clean Water Health and Wellness Act which I authored with Reps. Tony Kurtz and Scott Krug (R-Rome). The bill would create a pilot program at the Department of Health Services to help well owners cover the cost of remediation from nitrate contamination. If enacted, this bill would enable private well owners living in a county that chooses to participate in the pilot program to contact their local health department to request a nitrate test. The department would then submit a water sample, report the results to DHS and the well owner, suggest a remediation method if necessary, and then recommend a grant amount. Well owners would be eligible for grants up to \$2,500.

While this provision was removed from the budget, it is still advancing as a standalone bill – Senate Bill 137. It has passed through the committee process in the Senate, and is available for a floor vote. I will continue to advocate for it because I know that it could go a long way toward cleaning up nitrate issues in Central and Western Wisconsin.