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*NOTE: This column is being submitted by Sen. Scott Fitzgerald for your consideration to print.*

## **Wisconsin's Biennial Budget Process**

Each year, about 1,600 bills are introduced in the Wisconsin Legislature. About 20 percent of these bills will make it all the way through the legislative process and be signed into law. But there is only one bill that we as legislators are required by law to pass: the Biennial State Budget, the longest and most complex bill of the legislative session, which lays out how much money the state can spend over the following two years, and what we can spend it on. As we continue the difficult task of crafting this bill, I would like to share a little bit about how the budget process works, and the many opportunities to get involved.

You have, no doubt, heard a great deal about various aspects of the state budget since fall—the time of year that state agencies are tasked every two years with creating budget requests and submitting them to the Governor. The Governor and the many personnel employed within his administration then assemble each of these requests, making changes as necessary to create a budget proposal, a massive document detailing two years of state spending, which is presented to the legislature at a budget address early in every odd-numbered year.

After the legislature receives the Governor's proposed budget, each Senator and Representative and their staff begin the long task of reviewing the many features contained within this proposal. The first legislators to take official action on the budget are the members of the Joint Committee on Finance, a legislative committee with representatives from both the Senate and the Assembly.

The first step the members of Joint Finance take in preparing the budget is one of the most important of the legislative process: they gather constituent feedback by holding a series of public hearings around the state where members of the community are welcome to share their ideas and concerns.

With all of this input in hand, the Joint Finance Committee makes changes to the Governor's proposal to craft their own version of the state budget. These changes are made through a series of committee meetings called "Executive Sessions," held through the spring, during which committee members discuss each proposal—or "budget paper"—line by line in order to determine which items to keep, change, and remove. All the while, committee members, as well as other legislators and their offices, continue to receive input from members of the public, stakeholders, and other government personnel on the items being debated in committee.

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Once the Joint Committee on Finance has completed its version of the budget, it submits for approval the entirety of the proposal as a “substitute amendment,” an amendment that overwrites the previous version of a bill. This new version of the budget is sent back to the house in which it was first introduced. The budget bill then follows the normal legislative procedure, being debated on, amended, and finally passed by both the Senate and Assembly. When both houses agree on an identical version of the bill, it can be passed and sent to the Governor for his signature.

Once the Governor receives the version of the budget that the legislature has approved, he must decide whether to sign the bill as proposed, veto the bill in its entirety, or use partial vetoes to strike certain provisions. The legislature may override such vetoes with a two-thirds vote of both houses. Finally, the Governor signs the budget bill into law.

While the process of crafting the Wisconsin budget is long and complex, this intricate process offers the advantage that there are *many* opportunities for members of the public to get involved and offer their input. We have received a lot of valuable feedback already, but I encourage all of my constituents to continue to reach out to me and to other legislators and share your thoughts and concerns as Joint Finance, and then the full legislature, continue to debate the budget.

*Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau) represents the 13th Senate District, which covers portions of Dodge, Jefferson, Waukesha, Washington, Dane, and Columbia counties.*

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