

It's the spending, stupid

Wisconsin has long been a tax hell where it is more expensive to live, work, and play than in most other states. Gov. Scott Walker and the legislative Republicans made some progress over the last eight years in making the state more affordable, but now many of those same legislative Republicans are allowing the state to slide back.

One of the myths perpetuated by Wisconsin's liberals is that Governor Walker and the Republicans cut spending and starved government when Walker was in office. We have all heard the claims of cutting "to the bone" and draconian austerity measures. All of those claims are wrong. The truth is that every state budget that Walker signed spent more than the previous one.

What Walker and his Republican partners in the Legislature did was keep the spending increases smaller than normal while cutting taxes, deregulating, and aggressively working to improve the business climate. The result was a sustained period of improving in the national tax burden rankings (primarily because other states were jacking up taxes while Wisconsin held steady), higher employment, private-sector growth, and increasing tax revenues that resulted in budget surpluses.

It is a formula that works for a while, but it does not fix the root cause of the issue. Wisconsin is a tax hell because the government spends too much. Politicians can feed the spending beast without tax increases for a while by borrowing, juicing the economy with tax cuts and deregulation, and financial gimmickry, but eventually the bill must be paid. State government does not have the ability to print money like the federal government.

Now that Governor Walker has been replaced by a doctrinaire, tax-and-spend Gov. Tony Evers, the legislative Republicans who worked so well with Walker are regressing.

The state budget is being crafted by the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee. Once the JFC is finished with the budget, it will be sent for votes and possible amendments in the Assembly and the Senate. Since the Republicans still command sizable majorities in both houses of the Legislature, the Republicans are in complete control of what goes into, and what gets left out of, the budget.

Over the past few weeks, the Republicans on the JFC have been on a spending spree. They decided to spend an additional \$500 million on K-12 education despite no correlation between spending and educational outcomes. The Republicans increased spending on UW by \$58 million even though the UW System has refused to consolidate and economize in the face of declining enrollment.

Last week, the JFC cranked up spending on transportation to the tune of \$484 million. Perhaps remembering the 2017 audit completed by the Legislative Audit Bureau that found billions of dollars of waste and overruns in the Department of Transportation, Republican leaders have promised a series of reform bills are in the works, but it is worth noting that they are willing to spend the money before any reforms are even introduced — much less in place.

On those three items alone, Republican leaders in the Legislature are already committing increasing spending by over a billion dollars — and there are dozens of state departments to go.

Republicans are also already acknowledging that the days of increasing spending without tax increases are over. Their desire to spend more is outstripping their ability to keep taxes in check. In order to support the spending increases for transportation, the Republicans voted to increase vehicle title fees by \$95 and annual registration fees by \$10. They expect these to extract an additional \$393 million from hardworking Wisconsinites to support their gross spending habit.

Even during the Walker era, Wisconsin's Republicans have never been able to shake their spending addiction. They spend a little less than Democrats, but never actually cut spending. And if we never cut spending, we can never sustain cutting taxes. Now that Governor Evers has moved the spending goal even higher, the Republicans in the Legislature seem to be reveling in exploding spending without any pressure from the governor's office to restrain themselves.

The Republicans lost every statewide election in Wisconsin last year largely because they gave up on the conservative revolution and failed to give the Republican grass roots anything to be excited about. Their behavior in this budget is evidence that they have not learned the lesson.

(Owen B. Robinson is a West Bend resident. He can be reached at owen@bootsandsabers.com.)



OWEN

ROBINSON