

Pay Attention to Madison, There's a New Legislature in Session

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Senator Kathleen Vinehout's column about the new Wisconsin Legislature and legislative session. Kathleen shares her committee appointments and writes about what business the Legislature will take up in the next weeks.

MADISON - "Raise your right hand and repeat after me," the Supreme Court Justice directs newly elected and re-elected lawmakers.

So begins the new 2-year Legislative Session.

On the first working day of 2015 a new group of freshman legislators began their work. Ordinary folks from ordinary lives receive a crash course in state services, agencies, budgeting and parliamentary procedure.

Soon an onslaught of proposed bills will appear in the email in-boxes of lawmakers.

Over 1,500 bills will be introduced before the 2-year legislative session adjourns. These bills will flow through 16 Senate and 33 Assembly committees. Certain proposals will also be reviewed by 10 joint committees.

Each lawmaker is assigned a number of committees, other appointed commissions, boards or special study committees. This year I will serve as the Ranking Minority member of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee and the Agriculture, Small Business and Tourism Committee. I am also assigned to the Sporting Heritage, Mining and Forestry Committee, the State Tribal Relations Committee, the Joint Committee on Information Policy and Technology and the Education Reform and Government Operations Committee.

Education leaders are preparing for numerous proposed changes widely anticipated to include an expansion of state money for private schools. Special education advocates are concerned about public money going to private schools for special ed students. Others are concerned about a proposed expansion of independent charter schools run with tax dollars. Funds are limited and any tax dollars to private schools must be argued in the context of a tight budget and many needs.

Work on the state budget begins right away. The governor is expected to unveil his proposed budget near the end of January. Lawmakers will be crafting additions to the budget before they see the Governor's details. Once the two-year spending plan is unveiled, I'll be picking through the details and crafting changes. This work will be my focus for the spring.

As a rookie lawmaker, several years ago, I found it curious that my very first job was the most demanding task of the two-year session. This year more than one in five lawmakers never voted on a state budget. Special efforts must be made to educate newly elected 'ordinary citizens' on the impact of decisions on our local communities.

The task of understanding the budget is made more difficult with the addition of non-fiscal policy – law changes unrelated to the financial matters. This practice is seldom a good idea but has been popular among recent governors. Perhaps the practice is popular because the budget is the only bill the governor writes.

Last session nearly 100 separate pieces of policy unrelated to the state's finances became law with the passage of the state budget. This policy included unpopular items like taking away local powers to set locations for cell or TV towers.

The most important work of the Legislature will be the passage of this budget bill by midyear.

The decisions made in the next few months will affect all our lives. Some of the results of these decisions will not be seen for several years.

Because of the widespread and important decisions made by the Legislature – a group of 'ordinary citizens' from all walks of life - it is very important for us all to take the time to let our Legislators know the local effects of what is being discussed.

People want things fixed and nowhere is that more evident than with potholes and bridges. One closed bridge made life harried for all the residents near Taylor, Wisconsin. Getting a grip on the money needed for transportation repairs and new construction will be a real challenge in the coming year. Finding a way to pay will not be easy. It's the general "wisdom" about taxes: "Don't tax you, don't tax me. Tax the fellow behind the tree."

Tight dollars will increase the lure of tricks and smokescreens to balance the state budget. My plan is to do the homework to unravel the details and then bring the budget home to you with Town Hall meetings around western Wisconsin. We all need to know what's being discussed and how it affects you and your neighbors.

So stay tuned. There will be a lot happening!

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