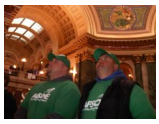
The Best Idea for a Bill Comes from You!

Posted on Nov 28, Posted by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District Category Wisconsin



Sen. Vinehout writes about how she drafts commonsense legislation from listening to her constituents, how ideas are born in the capitol, and the importance of speaking out if Wisconsin's laws need to be changed.

MADISON - "Where do you get ideas for bills?" a woman at a café recently asked me.

"The best ideas for bills come from people like you," I told her.

December begins a brief time of calm in the Capitol. But behind the scenes, lawmakers are working on new legislation. In the next few weeks I will be drafting bills to introduce in January. I am looking for your ideas!

Lawmakers will open the 103rd session of the Wisconsin Legislature on January 3rd. On that day, and for perhaps the next fifteen months, legislators will introduce roughly 1,800 bills or proposals.

Many of my best ideas for new legislation come from people like you. Ideas show up in my inbox or as a phone call. Often these proposals happen because a question seems to have no commonsense answer.

For example, two local school superintendents contacted me with the same question. “Why does the state give us extra money to help run rural schools and – in the same funding formula – take away some of our state aid?”

I introduced a bill to change the school aid formula and bring needed aid to rural schools. Broadband is another unmet rural need.

Many people called to complain about a lack of high-speed Internet service. Through research I discovered unused funds and introduced a bill to use these funds to expand rural broadband. Much work remains to bring Internet access to all.

Sometimes a new and serious problem occurs and many constituents with similar complaints contact me. Such is the case with sand mining.

Over the years many constituents have contacted me with specific problems that resulted in me drafting new proposals. In one example, a man bought land and built his “dream house” in rural Jackson County. He called in tears one day when he learned quite by accident neighbors on three sides of the property had contracts with sand mines and plan to open a mine. This arrangement was made before he bought the land.

His sad story resulted in a bill that requires disclosure of sand mine contracts as part of the normal real estate buying process.

A mother called when she realized an unfair situation happened unintentionally – in this case because of a number in the law. Her son was graduating as valedictorian. State law awards these smart teens an Academic Scholarship. But the law limited the award to school districts with eighty students. Local enrollment had dropped to just below eighty, leaving her son and other smart rural teens unable to get the same earned reward as their urban peers.

Many people tell me of their concern about the political system. I acted to make Wisconsin politics fairer and more transparent by introducing a series of bills: a referendum on nonpartisan redistricting; banning lawmakers from passing a law that financially benefits their campaign;

disqualifying a judge's action based on campaign contributions; and shining a light on corporate campaign contributions.

Similarly, people are concerned about legislative speed and secrecy – especially related to the budget. I've introduced proposals to slow things down and keep nonfiscal policy out of the budget. It is interesting to note that none of these proposals passed – or even had a hearing.

Often people call me when they are upset over threats to their way of life. Such was the case when railroad "police" warned locals who crossed rail tracks on their way to ice fishing. I introduced a bill to eliminate the powers of the railroad police and another to allow for a complaint system for those threatened.

As a result of anglers' concerns, rail officials are working with locals to build needed rail crossings. This is one example of how introducing a bill can create change even if the bill does not become law.

So don't be shy in letting me know what new bills should be introduced!

In the next few weeks I will be working through ideas for new legislation. The best ideas come from you. You can reach me toll free at 1-877-763-6636 or by email at sen.vinehout@legis.wisconsin.gov .

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