

A Few Budget Details that Didn't Make Headlines

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This budget is \$2.8 billion more than the last budget and is the largest in state history. While Gov. Walker has touted providing needed money for schools, roads, and the UW, some details didn't make the headlines. The Legislature now begins reviewing the budget and people need to make their priorities known.

MADISON - "Governors are a bit like salesmen," I recently told a reporter. "They put good news in the headlines and bury bad news in the small print."

Governor Walker recently released his two-year state budget. Amid much fanfare, he touted providing much needed money for schools, roads, and the UW. I went digging through budget documents released by the Governor. I knew there was more to the story.

First, I must say Wisconsin has one of the most opaque budgeting processes I have ever seen. For example, there is no clear table comparing actual spending in each fiscal year to budgeted spending.

We are still waiting for some details the Governor has not yet released. For example, his capital budget, which includes total proposed borrowing, is not yet available.

In the next month, the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB) will compile an independent analysis of the budget proposal. The LFB will provide details on where money comes from and how it is spent.

Until then, we have documents prepared by the Governor's staff and those who write our bills – the nonpartisan Legislative Reference Bureau (LRB). The small print I refer to came from the LRB, the Governor's office, and state agencies' requests.

How much will Wisconsin spend over two years? The total budget without borrowing is \$76,097,880,600. (The final budget will likely be closer to \$77 billion, as road fund borrowing and other building projects are added.)

This budget (without new debt) is \$2.8 billion more than the last budget and is the largest in state history. Of course, EVERY new budget is larger than the previous budget.

Governor Walker made a special point of reminding people his school and road spending is the "highest ever." Maybe someone should remind him, total spending is also the "highest ever."

The budget includes money from state taxes and fees including gas taxes, as well as tuition and money from the federal government. The Governor's structures his budget around the budget requests from each agency in state government. Governor Walker proposes spending \$68 million more than the agencies themselves requested.

Almost one-third of the budget goes to Health, of which ninety-percent is the Medicaid program. This is the largest and fastest growing part of spending. We often think of Medicaid as care for poorer families (BadgerCare). But, roughly two-thirds of the Medicaid budget is spent on long-term care for the elderly and disabled.

Over the next few months, we will learn much more about the budget details. In the meantime, here are a few items of small print that didn't make it in the Governor's Budget Address.

The Department of Natural Resources lost 43 positions while Circus World gained ten new positions.

The new budget added almost 500 positions to the Department of Administration (DOA). All but one of these jobs listed were "Supervisory and Management." This staff increase is almost half (47%) of the DOA workforce. Some positions are transfers to DOA from other agencies. Overall, the Governor increases net staff (some lost, some gained) by a little more than 400 full-time equivalents.

Buried in the small print is the elimination of the stray voltage program. This service helps farmers deal with stray electricity that has dire effects on animals and humans. The governor claimed the problems are mostly resolved. However, constituents tell me, in western Wisconsin, many problems remain.

The budget proposes eliminating the Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine. The last issue of this ever-popular magazine is set for winter of next year.

The budget eliminates the Educational Approval Board. This agency oversees for-profit colleges. Eliminating state oversight of for-profit colleges is foolish when some colleges closed, fraud investigations of others are continuing, and students question the value of the education.

Budgets are plans to spend resources based on our priorities. The process must be an opportunity for us to discuss our ideas and concerns for our state and invest money in solutions.

Debate on our priorities for state spending will occur over the next four or five months. Please add your voice to the decision-making process. The state budget is the most important bill lawmakers will take up and it deserves the input of all Wisconsinites!

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