Timing Suspicious as Governor Walker Readies Presidential Announcement

MADISON – Days after Republicans on the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) passed new and unprecedented restrictions on public access to government records – and the resulting outcry from citizens and groups of all political stripes forced Republicans to backtrack on their extreme position – many important questions about this proposal remain unanswered.

The timing of the Republicans' attack on open government is especially suspicious with Governor Walker set to formally announcing he is running for president one week from today.

"Following last week's historic assault on clean, open and transparent government, the people of Wisconsin are still waiting for answers on what Republicans were trying to accomplish, what they are trying to hide and who was responsible for requesting these changes," Assembly Democratic Leader **Peter Barca** (D-Kenosha) said. "I have served in the legislature for many years, and it is misleading and ludicrous to suggest that anything would get into a budget wrap-up motion without the knowledge and approval of the governor and legislative leaders."

"We are looking to members of the media and citizens to join us in holding Republicans responsible not only for this terrible budget but also for making swift and damaging changes to public policy under the cover of darkness – with no debate or public input," Barca said.

Today Democratic leaders also announced a bill with the goal of preventing future last-minute abuses of the budget process. This bill would require that all non-fiscal policy items identified by the non-partisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB) be referred to standing committees in each house of the legislature. Those would be required to hold a public hearing and an executive session on each item, thereby allowing for public input on each policy item inserted into the budget and allowing standing committees to voice their approval or disapproval.

“What Republicans did in the Joint Finance Committee last week was an affront to our democracy, and Democrats are ready with a solution,” Assistant Assembly Democratic Leader **Katrina Shankland** (D-Stevens Point) said. “Our legislation will ensure that non-fiscal items inserted into the budget – particularly ideas as egregious as rolling back open records laws, eliminating weekends for some workers and making it easier for predatory payday lenders to take advantage of vulnerable citizens – receive the public input and scrutiny they deserve.”

In recent years, open records requests have helped shed light on everything from potential corruption at Governor Walker’s jobs agency to criminal activity that led to the convictions of six of the governor’s former aides, as well as the revelation that major mining company donors essentially re-wrote large sections of Wisconsin’s environmental laws.