

Farmers Seek Action and Answers at the Capitol

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Tuesday, 02 February 2016 11:47 -

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/wisc-dairy-farm-s5.jpg>



Sen. Kathleen Vinehout writes about Ag Day at the Capitol. Farmers from across the state came to the Capitol to share ideas and perspective on what needs to be done to benefit agriculture and keep local communities thriving, not on partisan politics.

MADISON - "Just get it done!" The farmer was referring to a bill to change rules on high capacity wells. I listened. The chances of passing the bill are dim. Solving groundwater problems in Wisconsin is complex.

Farmers from all over our Senate District recently came to visit me as part of Ag Day at the Capitol. They came to share thoughts, seek answers and spur me to action.

The farmers wanted a bill to protect high capacity wells already drilled. However "just get it done" is not that easy.

Many different problems related to groundwater exist around the state.

Legislative action in recent years compounded the problems. Groundwater monitoring data around parts of the state were inadequate. In his budget, the governor instituted a policy to forbid DNR scientists from considering the cumulative effects of high cap wells. This means wells were permitted that maybe should not have been allowed. Recent court decisions made the problem even more complex.

Progress on other issues looked more positive. For example, legislation to make it easier for farmers to bring produce to food pantries would soon pass. One farmer asked me about legislation to fix definitions of farm equipment (known as Implements of Husbandry). He said, "Even with the new bill, things won't be fixed."

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I asked for details so I could work with the author of the bill.

These farmers knew the system. They realized progress was slow and sometimes involved several different bills over several years.

“What are your thoughts on fixing the transportation fund?” one farmer asked. Others chimed in about the poor state of roads. These farmers played several roles in their community and understood things were related. Good roads and good schools are necessary to sustain a thriving community. That means we need to consider tax increases and spend state money on local needs.

Several of the farmers served on the town board. They understood when other local officials were forced to turn blacktop roads back into gravel due to a lack of funds for road improvement. “Gravel is cheaper to maintain.”

I explained the transportation fund spends more money than it takes in, which anyone knows is unsustainable. We talked about the choices I made to put together my alternative transportation budget. I balanced the budget without historic borrowing called for by the governor. It’s a matter of spending less and raising more money.

Years ago lawmakers voted to remove the ‘indexing’ (fluctuating with inflation) of the gas tax. If indexing were in place, the tax would be about six cents higher. I support bringing back indexing and raising the tax by a nickel. Farmers agreed. “No one would notice a five-cent increase with gas at \$1.65 a gallon.”

A farmer asked “What about dyed fuel? Shouldn’t that be taxed?” Dyed fuel, which is not currently taxed, is literally dyed with coloring to distinguish it from taxed fuel. Use of the fuel is limited.

“What about tractor registration?” another farmer asked. “Tractors drive on the roads, they

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should help pay for them.” Consensus in the group was good roads are necessary to do business and everyone should pay their fair share.

A young man asked a pointed question. “What are you going to do about rural schools?” He changed schools just so he could gain access to the agriculture program.

I explained that in my alternative budget I laid out a different way to balance the budget and fix rural schools, which included getting rid of some tax loopholes.

In recent years, lawmakers in the majority and the governor gave away millions in tax credits. The consequence is not enough revenue to afford major changes needed to fix rural schools.

When the state does not pay its share for schools, local people pay more through property taxes. Referenda are passed just to keep schools open.

As folks left, a farmer said he was headed right home to get to work on a school referendum. He also served as chair of his local school board.

These farmers play many roles in their communities. They want to solve problems. Their earnestness, honesty and complete lack of partisanship help them focus on getting the job done.