

Two Worlds Apart: The Capitol and the Great River Road

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District

Tuesday, 26 September 2017 10:44 - Last Updated Tuesday, 26 September 2017 11:34

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/great-river-road-wi-s5.jpg>



The contrast between the frenzy in the Capitol on the state budget and Foxconn and the slow pace of life along the Great River Road in western Wisconsin is great, but the decisions made in Madison will significantly influence people's lives in western Wisconsin.

MADISON, WI - "Oh, my gosh," I said to the Senate page. "I need that book." The 'book' was a 744-page binder written by the nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau (LFB) detailing, in plain language, the decisions in the massive state budget.

Knowing what was in the binder was critical to making an informed vote on the state budget. However, there was no time. The binder showed up in my office just as the Senate was about to go into session to debate a \$3 billion dollar deal for Foxconn.



Less than twenty-four hours earlier, the budget writing committee made its final decisions on the

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state's two-year, seventy-six billion dollar spending plan. In the next twenty-four hours, the full Assembly would vote on the budget bill. By the end of the same week, Friday night, a majority in the Senate would pass the budget. In less than another week, both Foxconn and the budget would be law.

Lawmakers, on both sides of the aisle, scrambled to know what was in the budget bill.

After three months of delays and false starts, the rush was on. For the first time, we had the actual bill – a 1,087-page document listing specific changes to 9,052 sections of Wisconsin law. Each of the sections modified parts of the law, although some single law changes had many sections devoted to accomplishing the change. In addition to a 744-page summary, the LFB wrote over 200 papers detailing individual changes.

The rush to move both Foxconn and the budget left little opportunity for the public to know what was happening and to react. Additionally, the public had no opportunity to react to nearly seventy pieces of policy unrelated to the budget but added into the budget at the last minute.

All this activity, and the magnitude of the decisions committing state funds forward for decades, stood in sharp contrast to the western Wisconsin world I returned to following the last Senate votes.

On the Great River Road that runs along the Mississippi and down the western edge of Buffalo County the state budget was not on people's minds.

Conversation was about the hot weather and this being the first week of autumn. The leaves are beginning to drop. There is not much color yet except in the bottomland of the Buffalo River where the marsh plants are turning a rosy, reddish purple.

The grapes up on the bluff at Danzinger's Vineyard were harvested. The view as the sunsets over the Mississippi Valley is magnificent. The organic sunflowers at Hetrick's farm turned black, the heads hang down, waiting for the combine.

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The corn and soybeans are drying down and a year's worth of work will soon be in storage bins or taken to the grain elevator.

Motorcycles are angled neatly in front of the Nelson Cheese Factory. Riders sat on benches in the shade licking ice cream cones and considering the next stop on their weekend ride down and back along the River.

The Fresh Art fall tour is on tap for next week. The self-guided tour wanders through the back roads of Buffalo, Pepin and Pierce counties with stops at 17 galleries. Local artists display local art of all kinds, including, painting, pottery, photography, ceramics, weaving, sculpture, jewelry, metalwork, furniture and more – a glorious display of a year of work coming to fruition.

The two worlds – the state Capitol and the Great River Road – seem so disconnected. It is hard to move so quickly from one back to the other. Nevertheless, the ties are strong.

Even as crops are harvested and we enjoy the turning of the seasons, county boards, city councils and school boards are beginning to work on next year's budgets. Trying to figure out how to catch up on fixing the damage to roads caused by flooding, how to deal with increasing mental illness and drug addiction and provide alternatives to incarceration, how to maintain the classes and opportunities for students in our schools.

All of those decisions by local officials are shaped and limited by what the legislature did at the Capitol. The quality of life along the Great River Road will depend on those local decisions. We are all connected.