http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/wisc-capitol-dome-s5.jpg



Sen. Smith writes about the people's priorities – investments for K-12 education and our rural roads. Republicans and Democrats need to find the common ground to work together and do what people sent us to Madison to do.

MADISON - My role representing the 31st Senate District didn't just start when I was sworn into office on January 7th this year. It began last year when I started talking to voters in the 31st Senate District. I heard over and over from voters that they want lawmakers to work together to support our rural schools and fix our roads.

The people's budget presented by Governor Tony Evers provided a $1.4 billion increase for k-12 education. The Governor's plan included sparsity aid for rural districts and a start for restoring dramatic cuts made in the past eight years. Just last week, the Republican Joint Finance Committee members cut the Governor's education plan and replaced it with barely one-third of what was requested. Legislative leaders appear to have not heard the people's priorities.

Every single superintendent I talked to said special education is the greatest need for our public schools. Governor Evers included $600 million to help with special education. Republicans only added $50 million – this is an 83% cut from what the Governor proposed. Do we need to raise the volume of our voices?

Public schools aren't the only ones struggling. Towns and other municipalities have struggled for years to keep up with road repairs, and some have resorted to grinding up their roads to go back to gravel. The restrictions on raising revenue along with the flat level of road aids and shared revenue have left towns in dire straits.

On top of inadequate road aids, towns are also punished for sending late spending reports to the state after the May 15th deadline. Towns lose 1% of their road aids per day after the May 15th deadline, and up to 10% of their total aid lost! When you consider that town clerks take office the first week of May without support staff, they may not be aware of important deadlines. It happens more often than you'd think. A 1% penalty may not seem like a big number, but small towns with road aid payments around $100,000 can lose up to $10,000 of an already sparse aid payment.



That's why, after hearing about a $6,300 penalty for a town in Pierce County, I partnered with my Republican Assembly colleague Joan Ballweg from Green Lake County to introduce Senate Bill 167/Assembly Bill 184. Our bipartisan bill lowers the penalty for towns to only $100 per day. It's the least we can do until our leaders make the people's priorities their own priorities.

Recently a local official asked me why we were taking votes on paddle wheel games (yes, we did that) when all she hears are complaints about roads. She wondered if all legislators were hearing the same concerns and why would we be ignoring the people's priorities?

Citizens may not have the direct power to choose what bills we debate, but that doesn't mean our legislative leaders shouldn't be asked why. Better yet, we should inquire as to how many citizens have been asking for us to loosen restrictions on paddlewheels rather than helping towns repair our roads.

Of course, there are always other critical issues like the dairy crisis, addiction epidemic, health care worker shortage, clean water, medical marijuana and countless others. The common thread among all of these issues is why we can't work together to solve these serious problems.

If we buckle down and start working on the people's priorities, Republicans and Democrats could find the common ground to get things done. We could accomplish great things for Wisconsin if we can put the politics aside and do what people sent us to Madison to do. Raise the volume!