

Every Conversation Sparks a New Idea

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 01 January 2020 09:47

<https://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/sand-mining-wi-man-s5.jpg>



This week's column describes how the discussions in western Wisconsin help Sen. Smith craft new legislation to help all of the state. This is the second of three columns detailing reflections from 2019 and what the Senator is looking forward to in 2020.

BRUNSWICK, WI - The past year pushed me to learn and grow as a leader. As I spent time with my family over the holiday season, I reflected on the value of collaboration, a lesson learned in 2019. I thought about all the conversations I had with others, and how accomplishments were possible from the time spent learning from others.

We've collaborated with Democrats, Republicans, local leaders, industry experts and others to introduce 24 new bills. However, I don't use this number as a measuring stick for our progress through the year, it is a reflection of the discussions I've had with folks throughout the district.

Every conversation sparks a new idea. The best ideas come from advocates understanding a certain issue or professionals who have expertise in a specific field.



I appreciate hearing from constituents who contact my office directly, but I also want to meet people where they're at, whether that's coming home from work or heading to a community

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event. In the last year, I routinely parked my pickup truck along roads throughout the district and invited folks to “Stop ‘N Talk” about the issues they’re facing or things they’d like to see changed.

After Governor Tony Evers introduced his 2019-21 budget, I held 8 budget town halls from Black River Falls to Ellsworth and Alma to Eau Claire to discuss Wisconsin’s priorities. Folks consistently said they wanted to properly fund our public schools, fix our roads and expand Medicaid, which would provide healthcare coverage to more than 3,000 individuals in counties throughout the 31st Senate District.

As the year progressed, I prioritized meeting with constituents of diverse backgrounds, including farmers, teachers, students, town leaders, county board members, tribal members and many more. These meetings resulted in new ideas, innovative investments and inspired much of the legislation I introduced.

This fall, I had the chance to speak with local farmers on a milk hauler route ride along. The challenges farmers face are just as diverse as the solutions needed to help. These conversations with local farmers provided me with valuable insight for offering new bills to support small family farms, farm succession planning or help with sustainable agricultural practices.

Throughout the year, I visited local school districts, meeting teachers, reading children’s books with elementary students and participating in a high school civics classes. These visits remind me of the valuable role our schools have in preparing children for Wisconsin’s future workforce and ensuring our schools and teachers are well supported. As a result of these visits, I introduced legislation to make it easier for rural school districts to hire trained, qualified teachers by allowing retired teachers come back to the classroom.

In 2019, I also introduced two bills to address Wisconsin’s healthcare workforce shortage. Earlier in the year, I toured Gundersen Tri-County Hospital in Whitehall and learned about the consequences of the nursing shortage and how it affects the quality of care in rural communities.

Over the summer, I joined commuters on City of Eau Claire bus routes to listen to the issues

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that matter most. This experience motivated me to introduce legislation to recreate the Chippewa Valley Regional Transit Authority.

As Wisconsinites prepared for hunting season, I introduced legislation with my Democratic colleagues to allocate funding for CWD research, testing and carcass disposal sites.

During the gun hunting season, I toured CWD testing kiosks with Senator Schachtner and met hunters and scientists concerned about the growing spread of CWD. These conversations reinforced the need for these preventative measures to stop the spread of CWD and preserve Wisconsin's hunting heritage.

I'm looking forward to meeting more advocates and introducing new bills to support Wisconsinites in 2020. However, we won't be able to address the most critical issues or have meaningful accomplishments without non-partisan redistricting reform. Next week, I'll be writing about my 2020 priorities and the need for fair maps.