Seven Billion Dollars!

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Senator Smith writes about how Wisconsin can use our projected $7 billion budget surplus to fix past shortfalls in state funding and improve services and infrastructure for all Wisconsinites.

MADISON - Seven billion dollars!

To anyone, that is a huge number, difficult to visualize or comprehend. But that's the amount of Wisconsin's projected surplus over our next budget period. Often people joke that such a surplus will be met with 133 different spending proposals – one each from the 99 members of the State Assembly, 33 State Senators, and one for the governor.

This, of course, is an exaggeration. There are many paths to agreement between legislators and the governor, but finding a solution will be a long and perhaps contentious process.

We need to approach this budget with a keen eye for what our most important needs are. A

surplus is temporary, and we can't go wild with ideas that cannot be sustained once the money is spent. The surplus must be treated as an investment. Tax breaks for the rich or subsidizing private school tuition for wealthy families is foolish. We must invest in tax breaks for the middle class and in much-needed infrastructure projects that better the everyday lives of Wisconsinites.



Governor Evers' plan to invest $750 million for broadband expansion makes a huge stride in connecting all of Wisconsin access to high-speed internet. Connecting those households that are hardest to reach in unserved areas of the state will be a terrific boost to our economy, making it easier for folks to access healthcare, education or create home-based business startups. We only need to make this one-time investment for the improvements to be evident decades from now.



Increasing road aids to local towns, villages and counties is another example of one-time investments that will reap long-term benefits. Many of our roads and bridges are in disrepair or need replacement. Making investments in our physical infrastructure will increase the safety of our roads and bridges and reduce damage to vehicles from aging infrastructure, sparing families and businesses costly repairs.

In areas like local government, inadequate funding has led to local referenda just so communities can continue to fund essential services like law enforcement and fire protection, or pay assistant district attorneys. With Governor Evers' one-time injection of funds for local revenue, we can begin to fix that formula to be fair and to meet the needs and expectations of communities instead of yearly property tax increases.



Another example of a failed funding formula is the one that supports our Pre K-12 public education system. This problem dates all the way back to 1993, when a "temporary" revenue freeze was made permanent. Districts that happened to spend a lot in 1993 were able to continue collecting that higher level of revenue, leaving districts that were relatively more frugal behind.

Over thirty years, the gap between wealthier districts and poorer districts has only grown with every referendum that passes. Because there is such a disparity between the two, policymakers have struggled to fix the funding formula, thinking the only way would be to cut funding for high-revenue districts to shore up the low-revenue districts. Now, a one-time injection of funds could allow low-revenue districts to catch up to their high-revenue sister communities.



Throughout the entire state, the lack of affordable childcare has caused problems for working families. We aren't alone – this is a national problem, and has been exacerbated by closures stemming from the pandemic. Most brain development happens in the first six years of life, and support for young children yields dividends years down the road as they attend school and venture into the working world. It's only right that we do what we can to ensure safe and reliable child care so Wisconsin can become a national leader in early-childhood learning.

This budget presents us with an amazing opportunity to make a very real difference in the lives of Wisconsin's families. We must set aside political sideshows and make sure we do not waste this opportunity to do good things with our $7 billion surplus. Governor Evers introduced a budget that, along with the biggest middle-class tax cut in state history, will keep us moving forward as a state. The Republican leaders of the Legislature have an opportunity to be partners instead of obstructionists. In the coming weeks and months, we'll see how it all plays out.

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