

What's On the Chopping Block?

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Senator Smith discusses several key programs Republicans eliminated from the Governor's budget and the importance of the Governor's proposed investments to Wisconsin's future prosperity.

MADISON - Last week the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee, made up of 12 Republicans and 4 Democrats, were supposed to begin deliberating on the Governor's biennial budget proposal. Instead, in a 12-4 party line vote, Republicans' first action was to remove the vast majority of Governor Evers' proposal. No deliberation, just flat out dismissal for the third time since Governor Evers became Governor.

This is no surprise. Republican leaders promised they'd gut the Governor's budget only minutes after he first presented it in February, before a single legislator had even seen the budget document. Blind partisanship out the gate.

I don't think anyone expects 132 legislators to agree on 100% of any budget bill. That's why we have listening sessions, committee hearings and floor sessions – to hear from each other and the public and to hash out differences of opinion.

In our present political environment, it's become standard procedure that anything suggested by a Democrat is ignored or dismissed out of hand without even the slightest consideration by Republicans. It's sad this has been the fate of the Governor's budget for a third time in a row.

One provision that's been unceremoniously stripped from the budget is paid family and medical leave. Paid leave is a boon to our economy – it helps families care for sick kids, aging relatives and to get themselves well enough to keep working. If Wisconsin women participated in the labor force at the same rate they do in countries with paid family and medical leave, we would have an estimated 22,000 more workers in the state and \$158 million more in wages earned statewide.

But 62% of Wisconsinites do not have access to even unpaid family and medical leave under federal law. The Governor's budget contained provisions to provide up to 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave for Wisconsin and expanded eligibility for the program to include unexpected loss of child care.

After a one-time startup cost of \$243 million from our \$7 billion budget surplus, the program would become self-sustaining through payroll contributions. Funding this program is critical to ensuring Wisconsinites welcoming a child into their lives or caring for loved ones at home don't have to worry about their jobs or struggling financially while temporarily away from work.

Another provision the Joint Finance Committee stripped from the Governor's proposed budget was marijuana legalization. Polls and referenda have shown again and again how popular medical marijuana legalization is with Wisconsinites across the political spectrum. In 2019, the Marquette University Law School poll found over 80% of Wisconsinites support the legalization of medical marijuana.

But with legalization stripped out of the Governor's budget, Wisconsinites will need to keep crossing the border – any border – for pain relief. Just this past year, Illinois estimated they collected over \$36 million in taxes from Wisconsinites travelling across state lines to purchase marijuana. It's past time we listened to our constituents and legalized medical marijuana.

These were only two of the 545 items Republicans stripped from the Governor's budget proposal. Some of the other changes included:

- Passing on the \$1.6 billion in savings we'd get from the federal government for fully expanding Medicaid in Wisconsin
- Failing to close loopholes that enable manufacturers to get out of paying taxes to the tune of \$400 million
- Deleting \$1.2 billion worth of tax relief for middle class families
- Eliminating PFAS standards for drinking water, surface waters and groundwater
- Cutting \$800 million allocated to fully expand broadband in Wisconsin
- Eradicating \$576 million in additional funding for local governments in shared revenue

Governor Evers' budget does the right thing for Wisconsinites and for Wisconsin's economy. Tossing out reasonable proposals without serious consideration is shortsighted and disingenuous. When reasonable suggestions are dismissed without consideration, the process is broken.

