

The Power of the Purse

Posted on Apr 24, Posted by [Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



Senator Smith details the role and responsibilities of the Joint Finance Committee, and how politics is getting in the way of its work for the people of Wisconsin.

MADISON - In a recent column, I wrote about legislation that went unfinished. Many of the issues that were mentioned were ignored from lack of concern by the majority party or for purely political reasons. There are still ways to get things done, even if the full legislature has adjourned. Case in point: The Joint Finance Committee (JFC) and all of its unfinished business.

JFC consists of 16 members; eight members from both houses of the legislature. Any and all considerations of spending must go through and get the approval of the JFC. Committees are able to meet, hold hearings and vote even after the legislative session comes to an end.

Sometimes JFC will make specific decisions that were undecided by the legislature and Governor at the time when a bill was passed into law. But, the lion share of their work involves vetting appropriation bills during the legislative process to create new laws and state programs. As the Legislature's finance committee, they control the "purse strings" for the legislative branch of government.

One of the most important advantages of holding the majorities in the legislature is the control of the JFC. Whoever holds the majority assigns the number of seats each party can occupy. The Republicans hold that advantage by a 12 to 4 margin.

Because our government must function all year round, our agencies must be fully funded to fulfill their obligations. It is normal for agencies to submit requests of funding to JFC for all sorts of reasons at any time of the year. Needs don't always follow the same calendar that the legislature follows.

What shouldn't be the case is allowing a 16-person committee to derail laws by not funding them, even if they were passed by the entire legislature and signed by the Governor. No committee should have that much power.

What is more alarming is that it only takes one person on a 16-member committee to essentially veto a funding decision anonymously for any reason. It's happened numerous times with the Department of Natural Resources. Stewardship purchases have been held up because one member doesn't like it. It offers the public no reason for denial and no chance for debate. Where's the transparency?



It can be quite a helpless feeling when the only thing stopping important actions from occurring is illogical political disputes over funding. Even the Governor is left waiting and hoping JFC will complete the job after the entire legislature passed the bill and the Governor signed it into law.

The Governor took an action, which he had only tried once before when he called for JFC to meet and take up the already approved \$125 million for PFAS cleanup and the \$15 million for the Chippewa Valley healthcare crisis. On April 16th Republican JFC members didn't bother showing up because they were in Washington, D.C. at a fundraiser.

Republicans wanted to strip the DNR of its power to actually go after the polluters who are responsible for PFAS poisoning. The Governor vetoed that bill and now they refuse to release the much needed funds to communities that need to clean up their water.



As far as the Chippewa Valley Healthcare funding, the Republicans continue to complain about the Governor vetoing their attempt to restrict the funding to emergency room capital costs. The Governor agrees with our providers who want more flexibility to pay for more staff or other services beside emergency costs.

If JFC would release the \$15 million that was passed into law, the Department of Health Services could immediately consider grant requests from our local providers to begin filling the gaps left by the departure of HSHS.

Weaponizing JFC to undermine the legislative process and co-equal branches of government is flat-out wrong. Clean drinking water and immediately helping with the HSHS hospital closure crisis should transcend politics and put the power of the purse back in the public's hands.

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District

includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.

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