

Looking Forward to the Challenges of 2017

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This week Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about the many constituents who have offered solutions to Wisconsin's troubles in 2016, while also encouraging folks to send new ideas for 2017.

ALMA, WI - The turn of the calendar to 2017 brings us hope for better prospects in our public affairs. I am particularly inspired this season for the many who wrote with solutions to problems facing our state.

The many letters from readers gives me optimism for a coming bloom of civic mindedness. Certainly your notes and letters bring a fresh approach to lingering problems.

I do see signs on the horizon that our state may be stumbling.

Deep budget cuts have affected the forward progress of our University of Wisconsin System. Faculty have left UW and taken their research dollars with them. For the first time in 45 years UW Madison does not rank in the top five universities in research spending according to the National Science Foundation.

A second trouble spot is the low number of start-up businesses in Wisconsin. For the second year in a row, Wisconsin ranked last in the nation in start-up business activity according to a Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation report.

Investment in research at the UW spurs start-up businesses. Growth in new companies translates to growth in our economy. According to a report released earlier this year by the UW Center for Community and Economic Development, new businesses are the source of over a quarter of new jobs in Wisconsin.

Our economy is sputtering. Wisconsin lagged compared to the national economy in recovering from the 2008-09 recession. Our state took six years to gain back all the jobs lost in the Great Recession – a whole year after the nation recovered and two years after Minnesota recovered.

Another trouble spot is the lack of teachers and students going into education. Schools of education are reporting fewer graduates and local districts are reporting fewer applicants for open teaching positions. Future budgets must invest in K-12, technical college and the UW to assure us of our needed talented and trained workforce.

Competing with education funding in coming budget debates will be transportation needs. Our road fund is basically bankrupt. Spending has outpaced revenue for several years. Now, nearly a quarter of every dollar must be used to pay off debt.

Even the General Fund (used to pay mostly for schools and colleges, health care, local government, and corrections) has financial struggles. Earlier this year the governor refinanced debt – kicking the can down the road – to free up cash for the new budget.

Other signs of trouble include late, altered and missing financial reports. Most recently the state missed the mid-December deadline for the release of the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report.

Troubles on the horizon will, fortunately, be met with insights gained from new knowledge. Soon the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau (LAB) will release an audit of the Department of Transportation. Later this spring a report from the LAB on the operations of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation will help us understand the agency responsible for state efforts to create jobs.

The best solutions for our problems come from the ingenuity of the people of our great state. Thanks to people who wrote with ideas for new legislation. Many of you wrote with ideas for fixing roads and funding schools.

Several people wrote me asking to limit state money going to private schools. Kathleen of Arcadia suggested new money for private schools be only from new funds and never taken out of public schools. Mary wanted to use monies going to private schools to pay for road construction.

Others wrote of improving broadband, lowering health insurance costs, protecting water resources and restoring local control.

Still others wrote about fixing our political system including the drawing of new nonpartisan legislative districts, more civic education, and a brighter light shown on who is writing new legislation.

I support these ideas. I am also hopeful nonpartisan redistricting may happen as part of a pending court case.

The New Year will bring new faces to the Legislature. But a familiar face won't be seen in the Assembly Chambers. Our Senate District sends a big thank-you to Representative Chris Danou. My heart is filled with profound appreciation for the tireless advocacy Rep. Danou provided us in western Wisconsin.

Wishing a happy and prosperous New Year to you, dear reader. Don't forget to write.

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