Budgeting to Reflect the Will of the People

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Sen. Smith writes about the budget process and People's Budget listening sessions hosted by Governor Evers. Wisconsinites need to know they can get involved and advocate at every stage of the process.

MADISON - It's often said that a budget is more than just a fiscal document, it's a moral document. While Wisconsin leaders work on creating and approving a new budget, we must make sure our state budget reflects the values we share as a state. You have an opportunity to get involved and advocate at every stage of the budget process, beginning with the People's Budget listening sessions.

Two years ago, Governor Evers scheduled budget listening sessions around the state to hear from people like you while preparing his first budget. Hundreds of people showed up for each session and were divided into groups based on policy topics of interest. I attended most sessions and was duly impressed by the great discussions that took place. The Governor made it around to each discussion so he could personally hear from the public. In the end, this helped Governor Evers deliver the People's Budget, which truly reflected the will of the People.

Two years have passed and it's time again for the Governor to present us with another budget proposal. This year, as you can imagine, it's impossible to responsibly schedule in-person budget-listening sessions. But this hasn't prevented the Governor from holding listening sessions to help craft the next People's Budget. Although the listening sessions have been held virtually this year, they've proven to be very productive.

Each budget listening session focused on different topics. The first session, held on November 17th, focused on healthcare and public health, which is certainly appropriate while living through a global pandemic. On December 2nd, the listening session centered on the environment, infrastructure and economy, topics incredibly important to create a safe and sustainable future for generations to come. In 2020, during America's reckoning of systemic racism, it only made sense for Governor Evers to hold a budget listening session on Criminal Justice Reform, which took place on December 8th.

Throughout the budget process, Governor Evers and your elected officials want to know your budget priorities as they debate over how available funding will be spent over the next two years. The government is responsible for creating a budget that invests in our public schools, infrastructure and unemployment insurance system. The budget also supports the work of firefighters and law enforcement, our healthcare system and more.

These are the most basic examples that most people may agree need to be included in the budget, but determining other budget priorities can get difficult, especially while we're in the midst of a public health crisis. It'll be a challenge for Governor Evers to produce a budget prioritizing support services Wisconsinites need while addressing the global health pandemic.

Think of the state budget process similar to the way you manage your household budget. You consider the income you're expected to receive each month and the necessities you must pay for. While budgeting, it all comes down to balance. If you're able to balance your budget, you can make it another month. If you have more coming in than going out, you might say you're winning the battle. But, if you owe more than you have coming in, you have to look for ways to cut expenses.

Budgeting isn't much different for the government – unlike the federal government, Wisconsin

must balance the budget. Shared goals exist, such as bringing in more revenue, in case of unforeseen emergencies. But, unlike your own personal budget, government leaders have many different views and interests that impact budget priorities.

Last month, I met with Governor Evers to discuss budget priorities for residents of the 31st Senate District. We had a productive conversation about investing in rural broadband expansion, the UW-Eau Claire Science Hall, groundwater protections, CWD testing and much more. It's clear Governor Evers is listening to the needs of Wisconsin residents, whether he's having one-on-one conversations or at a budget listening session.

There's still time to have your voice heard while Governor Evers continues to craft the next budget. The final People's Budget listening session is happening on Wednesday, December 16th and it will focus on education and our schools. Submit public comment or register for the listening session here:
https://evers.wi.gov/Pages/BudgetListeningSessions.aspx
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