

The Budget is Just the Beginning

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
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Sen. Jeff Smith provides an overview of the budget process and what was included in the 2021-23 budget signed by Governor Evers last week.

MADISON - Like many households and businesses, the state operates on a budget. We have a biennial budget in Wisconsin, meaning it begins July 1st of each odd numbered year and ends June 30th of the following odd numbered year.

The budget supports much of what many families and individuals count on in their everyday lives. It will determine the conditions of your local roads, and whether your school district can afford to hire staff, repair a roof, or upgrade their computers. The budget supports our local governments with human services, law enforcement and fire protection. If a state budget isn't approved in a timely fashion, a domino effect occurs delaying budgets for all Wisconsin counties, municipalities and school districts.

You can think of the budget as one big bill. Unlike most other legislation, the governor introduces the budget bill, the Legislature changes it and the governor signs it into law. In the spring, the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee (JFC) held public hearings around the state to hear residents' thoughts on the budget. I listened in on these hearings and saw Wisconsinites testify one after another in support of Governor Evers' budget to help Wisconsin bounce back from the pandemic.

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The JFC then voted on the budget. Despite Wisconsinites' support for many of the budget provisions, the Committee's Republican Majority gutted 380 proposals including BadgerCare expansion and critical investments in our K-12 schools.

Whenever any other bill reaches a full vote of the Assembly and Senate, it will receive up or down votes based on the merits of a single proposal and it's pretty easy to determine one's stance on it. That's not always so easy with the budget. There's so much included in the budget bill, which makes it highly unlikely that anyone can be completely happy with every proposal and expenditure. I'm certainly never completely satisfied.

That's exactly how I felt when the Senate passed the budget on June 30th. The budget was a missed opportunity in many ways and didn't go nearly as far as we could with the surplus we have. But with so many Wisconsinites still recovering from the pandemic, I knew families needed relief, even if it wasn't how I would do it.

The bulk of the budget will help middle class families with historic tax breaks and additional education funding. The budget strengthens our caregiver workforce and supports hospitals that serve a large number of Medicaid and uninsured individuals. Counties and municipalities will get the road funding they need.

It was a good budget, but it could've been better. Like any other bill that comes to the floor, there are opportunities to introduce amendments. And that's exactly what we did. We tried to restore BadgerCare expansion, fix our broken school funding formula and offer a tax cut for lower income earners. Unfortunately, as members of the legislative minority, amendments introduced by Democrats are typically rejected. The majority leader habitually stands to reject our motions, which his members obediently follow. All of our ideas are then tabled without debate.

The governor signed the budget with partial vetoes. The budget fell woefully short in many areas but Governor Evers knew the budget needed to pass or we'd risk losing \$2.3 billion in additional federal relief for our K-12 schools.

