

Looking Forward to 2018

Written by Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District
Wednesday, 03 January 2018 14:41

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State Senator and possible gubernatorial candidate Kathleen Vinehout writes about the big events happening in 2018 and about the work the Legislature will be doing throughout the course of the year.

ALMA, WI - Snow falls gently on the farm. It's the light, fluffy snow that comes when it's very cold.

We've seen bitter temperatures to end the year. Like many, the cold caused its share of problems on our farm. I was reminded to appreciate running water when our well pump went out Christmas Eve. When an electric waterer failed, we carried buckets of water to our horses.



Bitter cold weather and a dwindling supply of propane caused Wisconsin to declare a state of energy emergency related to intermittent propane supplies. For the 250,000 Wisconsinites that depend on propane for heat, a shortage can be a big deal.

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After the relative calm of the Holiday Season, I expect the activities of the Legislature to heat up quickly in January. No one quite knows when will be the last day to pass a bill. This uncertainty is causing a great deal of urgency among lawmakers.

What causes the uncertainty is the tension and game playing between the Senate and Assembly Leaders. As usual, both leaders have bantered about when each body will adjourn for the campaign season. The banter somewhat resembles the school yard game of “chicken”.

Members of the Legislature will soon meet the voters. Many lawmakers ponder their promises made but not-yet-kept. They work with staff to put the final touches on bills they hope to pass.

2018 will be the year of many campaigns. Special elections in January, a nonpartisan primary in February, a Supreme Court race, and local nonpartisan elections – including every county board member in the state – in April.



Candidates who want to run for partisan elected office will begin collecting nomination signatures in mid-April. Fun begins in June when all partisan races will be set. June 1st is the deadline for turning in signatures for all partisan races. August brings us two big partisan primaries: the GOP US Senate race and the Democratic gubernatorial primary. November 6th is the general election date.

Mid-March is likely the time both legislative chambers will have their final days to meet as the full Senate and Assembly. But this does not mean the work of the state is finished.

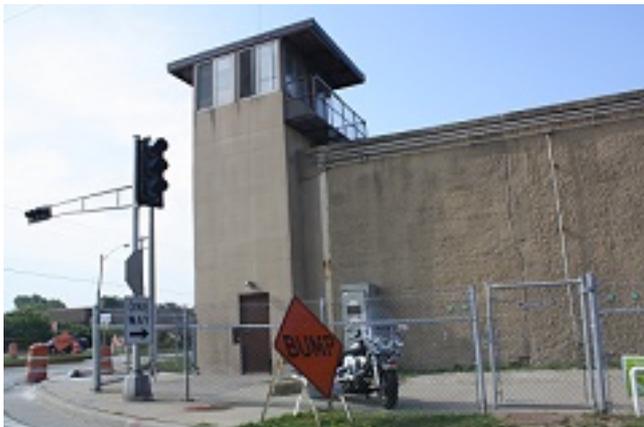
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The Finance and the Audit Committees meet all year, every year. Special “study committees” will be formed with members of the public adding their voices to help lawmakers address complex problems.

We will see new issues arise in the next few months. I expect to see at least some discussion of how to fix big problems. Woefully inadequate broadband, a broken system of school funding and the rising problems related to addiction, especially opioid abuse, are major problems many constituents want addressed.

Many Democrats, including myself, will continue to push for real changes to improve health care access and affordability. A great beginning is to create a state marketplace for health care – a bill I’ve written to give Wisconsin the flexibility we need to fix health care.



Also, on the agenda in 2018, is taking a good look at what’s happening with our justice system. We have roughly double the number of people in prison compared to Minnesota. Even though we have a similar crime rate and similar population. Late in 2017, GOP leaders pushed through several bills to increase the minimum required penalties on some crimes and changed rules related to probation.

The bills would cost the state more and add to already overcrowded prisons. But leaders did not have any way to pay for the increased costs. Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester) recently told the Wheeler Report “we need to figure out, probably, a way to build a new state prison. ... I think that is something we will probably do this spring, but probably putting either revenues or bonding into upgrading our prisons.”

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Borrowing to build a new prison is going to cause controversy when our neighbor to the west already has a corrections system that costs less and reduces crime.

Looking forward, 2018 will be an exciting year of change.

The New Year is a great time for resolutions. I encourage everyone to resolve to be active in our great democracy, and be involved in the direction of this change.

Wishing you a Happy and Prosperous New Year!