

Constitutional Amendments

Nearly two dozen proposals were introduced in the State Assembly this session which sought to amend the Wisconsin constitution on one issue or another. Most of these were introduced for their first consideration.

In order to become law, proposed constitutional amendments must be passed by both houses of the legislature in the same form in two consecutive legislative sessions. If that occurs, the amendment then goes before the voters for consideration. I wanted to mention just two of the amendments which were introduced this session.

Senate Joint Resolution 5 proposed to limit the Governor's constitutional veto authority by prohibiting the Governor from creating new sentences using parts of two of more sentences in a bill. SJR 5, on its second consideration, passed the Senate unanimously and passed the Assembly by a vote of 94-1 (I voted in favor of passage). On April 1st, the state's voters acted overwhelmingly to ratify the amendment.

Assembly Joint Resolution 34 proposed to allow the creation of a state fund or program revenue account only if approved by a two-thirds vote of the Legislature. Funds from the state fund or program revenue account created following the ratification of the constitutional amendment could not be used for other purposes (such as transferred to another fund or to the general fund). AJR 34 passed the State Assembly by substantial margins, 91-6 (again, I voted in favor of passage). In the end, however, the Senate did not consider AJR 34. It will, therefore, have to return as a first consideration proposal again next session.

Cable TV: Access and Programming Issues

During the 2007-2008 legislative session, two bills were introduced in the Assembly relating to cable television; an issue that citizens in our state take very seriously.

Assembly Bill 207, better known as the "Cable Franchising Act", was passed by both houses of the legislature and signed into law by Governor Doyle as 2007 Wisconsin Act 42. AB 207 created a statewide franchising license for video service providers that will take the place of the current system in which municipalities negotiate with cable providers. There are still some lingering concerns about how this law will affect PEG channels and consumer protection rights.

The second cable television bill arose from the ongoing dispute between cable companies and the Big 10 and NFL Networks. Known to most people as the Fair Access to Networks bill, or FAN, Assembly Bill 604 would force arbitration between a video service provider and an independent channel if they could not agree upon a price for carrying the channel. The bill received a public hearing, but did not advance out of committee.

Protecting the Great Lakes

Living on the shoreline of Lake Michigan, Sheboyganites understand the importance of protecting Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes; protecting them from harm in terms of pollution, invasive species and from water diversions.

The Great Lakes Compact is part of the response to that need for protection. The Great Lakes Compact is an agreement between the eight Great Lakes states to protect the lakes from dangerous water diversions to water-needy states and countries.

Despite passage in the State Senate, Assembly leaders voiced disagreement over the enabling legislation and concerns about some provisions of the Compact. After some negotiations, however, an agreement was reached in early April on the Compact; with the Governor calling the Legislature into a Special Session to ratify the agreement (before Wisconsin's recent action, four states and two Canadian provinces had approved the compact).

(Left) Representative Van Akkeren enjoys a walk along the Lakefront Trail with his wife, Sue, and his grandson, Treston.



My Service on the Assembly Education Committee

The state of Wisconsin has around 900,000 school aged children that attend public school, private school, or are home schooled every year. It is the task of the Education Committees in each house to review proposals that relate to the education of those 900,000 students. Since being elected in 2002, I have had the distinctive opportunity of serving on the Assembly Education Committee. This session marked my third term on the committee.

Education is an issue that affects us all. It is important to make sure that our future generations are given the chance to make the best of their educational opportunities. I feel privileged to be serving on such an important committee.

The Assembly Education Committee is made up of 10 members; 6 Republicans and 4 Democrats. The committee is chaired by Representative Brett Davis (R-Oregon).

Over the course of the past year, the Education Committee has dealt with a variety of issues. Some of the proposals that have come before the committee this session include:

Assembly Bill 83: AB 83, now Act 223, creates an Agriculture Education and Workforce Development Board. The board is given the task of finding ways to help students transfer seamlessly from their schooling into Wisconsin's ever developing agriculture industry by creating stronger agriculture education curriculum.

Senate Bill 249: SB 249, signed into law as Wisconsin Act 40, enrolls Wisconsin in a federal program and pulls in federal funding to help families in need by covering the costs of Advanced Placement exams.

Senate Bill 396: Probably the most controversial issue we dealt with this session in the Education Committee, SB 396 changes current law to allow for the continued operation of virtual schools in WI. The language of the bill is a result of a series of negotiations. The approved

The Debate on Smoking

Smoking was, hands down, in terms of public interest, one of the major issues to come before the Legislature this session. Authored by Senator Fred Risser (D-Madison) and Representative Steve Wiekert (R-Appleton), the "Smoke Free Workplace Act" would have prohibited smoking in all public places and places of employment (including restaurants and taverns).

Among the major players in the heated controversy were the American Cancer Society, Smoke-Free Wisconsin



Representative Van Akkeren confers with Representative Sandy Pope-Roberts (ranking Democrat on the Assembly Education Committee)

and the Tavern League of Wisconsin. The American Cancer Society fought for an across the board ban, while the Tavern League sought to delay the imposition of the smoking ban on taverns until July 1, 2011.

Although attempts were made to reach a compromise, in the end this attempt failed with neither the State Senate nor State Assembly voting on the proposed smoking ban. I can say, however, with the utmost confidence, that we will see this legislation again when the 2009-2010 Legislative session begins next January.

bill would keep virtual schools open and receiving full funding and place a reasonable and expanding cap on enrollment while ensuring high standards are met by virtual schools.

Senate Bill 493: I was a primary author of this bill, which helps to address the troubling trend of youth suicide. SB 493 will heighten awareness of the issue by requiring that school districts distribute material to educators prepared by the Department of Public Instruction on the topic of youth suicide prevention. The bill was signed into law as Wisconsin Act 220.

I have enjoyed my time serving on the Education Committee and I look forward to the possibility of serving on the committee again next session.

Other Committees:
 Assembly Committee on Labor and Industry
 Assembly Committee on Tourism, Recreation and State Properties (Ranking Democratic Member)



Terry Van Akkeren

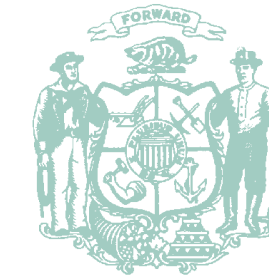
STATE REPRESENTATIVE

SPRING 2008

Wisconsin State Assembly
 PO Box 8953
 Madison, WI 53708

PRSR STD
 U.S. Postage
 PAID
 Permit No. 1749
 Madison, WI

LEGISLATIVE REPORT 2008



*****ECRWSS*****
 RESIDENTIAL CUSTOMER


Dear Friends and Neighbors:

As the 2007-2008 legislative session comes to a close, I wanted to take this opportunity to update you on the Legislature's work over the past year and a half, particularly our work on the state budget.

As is the case in most sessions, the completion of the state budget is the most important work before the State Legislature. On October 26th, the 2007-2009 biennial budget bill was signed into law. But it was not an easy chore. To say that the budget process did not run smoothly is a bit of an understatement. Certainly, some level of disagreement and conflict was to be expected with split control of the legislative houses, but I didn't expect the process to drag out into late October. Eventually, the pressure for a new state budget helped inspire the spirit of compromise and the budget was finally completed.

Once the budget process is completed, the Legislature sets its sights on the consideration and passage of other legislative proposals. We saw action on some important bills and, as is normally the case, other proposals failed to advance. I will, also, take part of this newsletter to update you on some of those issues...some that became law and some that did not.

Finally, I want to thank you all for giving me the opportunity of representing you in the Wisconsin State Assembly. I consider it a true honor.

Sincerely,

 Terry Van Akkeren

How to reach Terry Van Akkeren

Mail:
 Rep. Terry Van Akkeren
 P.O. Box 8953
 Madison, WI 53708

Phone:
 608-266-0656
 1-888-529-0026 (toll-free)

FAX:
 608-282-3626

E-mail:
 Rep.VanAkkeren@legis.wi.gov

The Budget Process

a.k.a. The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

Wisconsin has a biennial budget, a budget which covers a two year cycle. We, also, have a two year legislative session. So, each session, the primary objective of the legislature in the first year of the session is the adoption of a new state budget.

This session began normally; on February 13th of 2007, Governor Doyle addressed a joint session of the State Legislature and presented his proposed state budget. The budget was then sent to the Joint Committee on Finance for review.

Their review began with public hearings across the state and, then, moved into executive action (votes to keep, amend or remove budget provisions). Still, this was going pretty normally. The committee finished its work on June 20th and the budget was available for Senate consideration. Approximately a week later, on June 26th, the Senate took action on the state budget. The Assembly followed on July 10th. This was somewhat slower than recent sessions, but considering the split legislature and the difference in budget proposals, understandable.

When there are differences in the budgets adopted by each house of the Legislature, the next step is the formation of a conference committee to work out the differences and develop a compromise budget. That is where the process went south! Meetings of the conference committee seemed to go nowhere. Lots of talk...no action.

One...two...three months passed without a budget. There was even talk of not passing a new budget. Though, without one, increased school costs would lead to increased property taxes and, eventually, state programs (like MA, SeniorCare and the UW system) would run short on funding, unable to cover increased costs.

In an effort to force legislative action, Governor Doyle called the Legislature into a Special Session and put forward a budget compromise. On October 15th, the proposal was passed by the Senate and defeated by the Assembly.

Although the Special Session, itself, was not successful, I believe it helped spur the Governor and legislative leaders to negotiate a budget compromise. And, eight days later, a compromise was announced, passed by both houses on October 23rd.



Representative Van Akkeren meets with Sheboygan Common Council President Mark Hanna about issues before the State Legislature.

New Tax Credits and Deductions

- ✓ Employees who pay part of their **health insurance premiums** will be eligible for a tax deduction beginning in tax year 2008.
- ✓ The **college tuition deduction** is increased (including student fees) in the 2009 tax year.
- ✓ A **child care deduction** is phased-in beginning in tax year 2009.
- ✓ A **retirement income** tax exclusion of up to \$5000 of certain retirement income for those aged 65 and older becomes effective with the 2009 tax year. Note: The full exclusion of social security benefits begins with the 2008 tax year.
- ✓ The **Disabled Veteran/Surviving Spouse Property Tax Credit** is expanded to veterans rated as being "individually unemployable" and, therefore, receiving 100% disability benefits (meeting certain service-connected disability conditions). Certain age limits are, also, removed. Begins in the 2009 tax year.

Items of Note in the 2007-08 Biennial Budget

The 2007-08 Wisconsin biennial budget was, due to fiscal constraints, essentially a budget which had to deal with increasing costs and sought to continue to provide quality services and programs to our state's citizens. Below is a summary of a few programs of note in the budget.

BadgerCare Plus: Governor Doyle has long expressed a goal of providing health care to all Wisconsin children. That, in a nutshell, is the goal of the new BadgerCare Plus program. All Wisconsin children, regardless of income, are now eligible to enroll in BadgerCare Plus. Those with higher family incomes will pay higher premiums and co-pays under the program. Parents with incomes up to 200% of the poverty level will, also, be eligible for the program.

Family Care: Wisconsin spends 74% of its Medicaid funds to meet the health care and long term care needs of Wisconsin's seniors and disabled population. The Family Care program (which began as a pilot program in a handful of counties) provides community based care options as an alternative to nursing home care. The program is being expanded under the new budget and, as of February 1, 2008, is available in Sheboygan County.

Education: K-12 education continues to be a priority issue for me in the State Legislature. A solid educational system and an educated work force are keys to Wisconsin's future. Fortunately, we were able to provide modest increases in state support for K-12 education, along with much needed increased funding for special education, transportation and SAGE.

We, also, continued our strong support for the University



Representative Van Akkeren speaking in the State Assembly.

of Wisconsin System (including funding for the UW Growth Agenda) and the Wisconsin Technical College System (including a \$3 million increase in the biennium for job training grants). Our higher education system will help train our youth and help our businesses compete and grow in a global market.

Veterans: One of the most important items in the budget is the preservation of the Wisconsin G.I. Bill tuition remission program. Under the budget, the current program's provisions are retained and funding is provided to reimburse schools for the veterans' tuition. The program requires UW schools and our technical colleges to remit 100% of the tuition and fees for up to 128 credits or 8 semesters for Wisconsin veterans. Tuition remission is, also, provided for the children and spouses of veterans who died in the line of duty or were disabled.

Budget Adjustment Bill

It wasn't long after the 2007-09 state budget was signed into law that the impact of a nation-wide economic slow down began to show its effects on the Wisconsin economy. The Legislative Fiscal Bureau issued a report to Governor Doyle and the Wisconsin Legislature that Wisconsin was facing a projected deficit of \$653 million over the biennium.

On March 5th, 2008, Governor Doyle announced his call of the State Legislature into a Special Session to address the budget shortfall. Within the month, both the Assembly and Senate passed versions of the budget

adjustment bill. As with the original budget, the next (and most difficult) step is for the Governor and Legislative Leaders to negotiate a compromise bill. In addition to agency budget cuts, a few of the provisions under consideration include a hospital assessment, a delay in school funding equalization aid and combined reporting for tax purposes for those doing business in Wisconsin.

As I write this newsletter, negotiations continue and there is promising talk of an imminent agreement. I am hopeful that this compromise will both cut state spending while protecting our most important programs for our citizens and that final action will be taken before we enter the second year of the biennium!

A Sampling of TVA Sponsored Legislation:

AB 383: Youth Apprenticeship Grants
I authored this proposal to restore funding to the Youth Apprenticeship Grant Program, a youth training partnership between high schools and local businesses. We were able to restore these funds as part of the state budget.

AB 878/SB 493: Suicide Prevention
(see education article on page 6)

AB 217/SB 99: Do-Not-Call Expansion
At a time when we are relying more and more on our cell phones, this proposal would have expanded the Do-No-Call List to include cell phones. SB 99 passed the Senate unanimously, but was not brought up for consideration in the Assembly.

AB 417/SB 178: Autism Coverage
Attempts were made this session to require health insurance plans to provide a minimum amount of treatment for autism spectrum disorders. Despite the public outcry and the passage of SB 178 by a bipartisan vote in the Senate, the Assembly failed to help these Wisconsin families.

AB 42/AB 504/SB 15: DNR Secretary
All of these proposals would return the power to appoint the DNR Secretary to the DNR Board. Although SB 15 passed the Senate on a bipartisan vote, attempts to bring the issue up for discussion failed in the Assembly 45-50 (with the Assembly author voting NO!).



Governor Doyle signs SB 493 into law in the company of State School Superintendent Libby Burmaster, members of the Piaskowski family, Senator John Lehman, Representative Sondy Pope-Roberts, Sue Van Akkeren and Rep. Terry Van Akkeren.

Ethics and Campaign Finance Reform: Action & Inertia

The 2007-08 session began with a Special Session on ethics. Action was quickly taken with the passage of Special Session Senate Bill 1 before the end of the first month. That, unfortunately, was both the beginning and the end of the Legislature's action on ethics/campaign finance reform. Here's a brief look at a few of the bills under consideration this session.

January Special Session Senate Bill 1:
SS SB 1 replaced the Ethics Board and the inherently partisan Elections Board with the non-partisan Governmental Accountability Board. The independent Governmental Accountability Board has stronger powers in exercising its duties to regulate elections, campaign financing, ethics and lobbying laws. I was a cosponsor of the original bill proposed by Senators Ellis (R-Neenah) and Erpenbach (D-Middleton).

Senate Bill 12:
Reintroduced this session by Senators Ellis and Erpenbach, SB 12 would have made important changes to Wisconsin's campaign finance laws aimed at increasing accountability in Wisconsin elections and reducing the influence of special interest money. In the end, SB 12 did not come up for consideration in either the State Senate or Assembly.

Assembly Bill 61/Senate Bill 25:
Under this proposal, incumbent legislators and other state officials would be prohibited from fund raising during the time period when the state budget is under consideration. Unfortunately, this proposal, too, failed to pass. Attempts in the Assembly to bring AB 61 up for a vote failed along partisan lines, with even the Assembly author voting against bringing his own bill up for consideration.

Senate Bill 171/Assembly Bill 250:
It is vital to protect the election of justices to the State Supreme Court from the influence of special interests as they campaign for election or re-election. The last two court races have been examples of the negative influence of special interest funds on these races. Although AB 171 was passed by the State Senate on a bipartisan vote in mid-February and was immediately sent to the Assembly, the bill remained hidden in the office of the Assembly Speaker and was not referred to an Assembly Committee until March 13 (the day after the Assembly's last scheduled day to vote on bills). This prohibited any attempt to bring this bill up for consideration

