

Senior Driving Bill Stalled Once Again

Many of you may have seen the dramatic footage of the 82 year old man driving his minivan into the goal posts during a Stanley-Boyd High School football game in the Chippewa Falls area this past fall. News reports about unsafe senior drivers endangering themselves and others are all too familiar, yet nonetheless tragic.

For many years now, I have been working with the Alzheimer's Association, AARP and the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups on legislation that would help make our roads safer. Under my proposal, Wisconsin's license renewal period would be kept at 8 years, but drivers between the ages of 75 and 84 would come in every 3 years for a free vision test or submit the results from their doctor's exam. Those age 85 and over would have to pass a vision and written knowledge test every two years.

Wisconsin is among just a handful of states with an 8-year or longer drivers license renewal cycle; it is the only one of these states without special provisions for older drivers. I believe that any person who is able to should be permitted to drive in Wisconsin, but 8 years is too long when it comes to older drivers. The legislation would not change DOT's current abilities to require more tests of any driver such as a road test. Under my bill DOT is required to issue a report on the effects of the new licensing requirements on highway safety, appoint an advisory council to study the effects of aging on driving ability, and to examine new and existing modes of alternative transportation for seniors.

As people age they begin to have vision problems, cognitive difficulties and diminished reflexes. Research shows that 47% of those age 85 and older have some form of dementia, primarily Alzheimer's disease. Fatal crash rates rise significantly after age 75. Wisconsin's oldest drivers have a higher fatal accident rate per miles driven than every other age group, including teenagers. The legislature addressed the problem of teenage

accident rates by adopting a graduated driver license law. I am proud to have voted for this bill which has reduced teen crash rates by as much as 30 percent.

Unfortunately, I never got a chance to vote on my older driver bill. An amendment that removed the knowledge testing component was adopted by the Assembly Committee on Transportation. As a result, the Alzheimer's Association and others withdrew their support for the bill, and it never came up for a vote before the full Assembly. This is a problem that will only get worse with time. The fastest-growing segment of our population is people over 75 years old. The legislature will need to address this issue; the sooner the better.



Rep. Wasserman speaks with State Senator Alan Lasee on an Wisconsin Air National Guard Refueling Mission. Legislators were invited to witness firsthand the important work that Wisconsin's Air National Guard members do.

Breaking the Cycle of Teen Pregnancy

Although television shows and Hollywood films make light of teen pregnancy, the statistics are shocking. In 2006 there were 313 babies born to mothers 15 years-old and younger in Wisconsin. Milwaukee ranks seventh in the nation in teen births. Personally, I have seen far too many 13, 14 and 15 year-old mothers in my practice as an OB/GYN. The toll on these young women is terrible; the effect on their babies even worse.

A boy born to a teen mother is almost 3 times more likely to end up in jail. Eight out of ten girls born to teen mothers will become teen mothers themselves.

Children born to teenage mothers are at a significantly higher risk of abuse and neglect. No child deserves to start life off with the odds so strongly stacked against them. We have to find ways to get them out from behind the eight ball.

I introduced legislation that would require that a fit and willing adult be appointed as guardian of each infant born to any mother 15 years-old or younger. The guardianship would last until the mother turned 18 and successfully completed a parenting class. Focusing on the infant is the best way to break the vicious cycle of teen pregnancy, and our only real hope of ensuring that these children do not follow in their mothers' footsteps.

A 15 year old is not old enough to get married, drive, vote, smoke, drink, gamble, sign legal documents, open a checking account or get a credit card. Sadly too many young girls become mothers, a role they are incapable of handling. They may be ready biologically, but are nowhere near ready emotionally or financially. And it is the babies who end up paying the price.

These babies are much more likely to end up in foster care, which can be devastating for the families and expensive for taxpayers. More than three-fourths of unmarried teen mothers end up needing government assistance within five years of the birth of their first child. Wisconsin taxpayers spent an estimated \$156 million to care for teen mothers and their babies in 2004.

Providing the guidance of an adult guardian will help young mothers complete school and become self-supporting, productive members of society. More importantly it will help protect their vulnerable infants.

While my bill did not pass this session, I hope that it will spur conversation about how to end the cycle of teen pregnancy. With the right help these babies can have a real chance for a successful life.



Sheldon Wasserman

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

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Spring 2008 Newsletter

WASSERMAN'S RECORD

2007-2008 FLOOR SESSION

Attendance Record

100%

(29 of 29 days)

Voting Record

100%

(295 of 295 votes)

HOW TO REACH ME

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assembly/asm22/news/

END OF SESSION REPORT

Dear Neighbors:

It has been an honor and a privilege to be your voice in the Wisconsin State Assembly since 1995. Serving the people of the 22nd Assembly District has been one of the highlights of my life. But fourteen years as a State Representative is long enough. It is time to move on to new challenges. I look forward to serving you in the future in a different capacity. I wish whoever succeeds me the best of luck. Please continue to share your ideas and concerns with the new representative. I could not have done my job without your help and encouragement.

I am proud of the work that I have done as your state representative. I never missed a single day of session and participated in 4728 out of the 4734 roll call votes. I visited with over 10,000 fourth graders, taking the time to talk with them about the importance of civic involvement and public service. I consistently ranked at the bottom of the list for amount of per diems collected by legislators. Instead of driving and collecting mileage, I saved the state money and made productive use of my time by taking the Badger Bus back and forth to Madison. I did my best to embody the views and values of the residents of the district.

My biggest disappointment is that no matter how hard I fought, I was unable to end the cynical practice of using accounting tricks to hide the fact that state government spends more than it takes in. Businesses and families across the state are able to live within their budgets; it is a shame that the state cannot do the same thing.

Although the regularly scheduled 2007-2008 legislative session ended in March, the legislature's work was not done before this was sent to the printer. The Governor called the legislature into special session to approve the Great Lakes Compact, but that has not yet happened. And the legislature still needs to pass a budget repair bill addressing the deficit caused by a weaker-than-anticipated economy. I will put an update on these two issues on my website. Inside you will find information on the proposals I focused on this session.

Although I am not going to be your representative next session, please feel free to contact me during the coming months if I may be of service, or if you want to share your thoughts on an issue that is important to you. Once again, it has been an honor to serve as your representative in Madison. Thank you for giving me that opportunity.

Sincerely,

Missed Opportunities

Too often, politicians put partisan advantage and self-interest ahead of good public policy, and the citizens of the state end up paying the price. This session, special interests used their political clout to kill bills that the majority of the public supports, bills that would have improved public health and saved the taxpayers money.

One of the most blatant examples is the failure to enact a comprehensive ban on smoking in all public buildings. Poll after poll shows that a majority of Wisconsinites support a ban. Yet special interests were able to keep the bill from being voted on in either the Senate or the Assembly. As a result, people across the state will continue to be exposed to second hand smoke.

3,000 non-smokers die each year from lung cancer caused by exposure to second hand smoke. And 35,000 non-smokers die each year from heart disease caused by second hand smoke. The state spends \$2 billion annually to treat smoking-related illnesses, including \$480 million in Medicaid payments alone. These expenditures amount to a hidden tax of \$603 each year on every Wisconsin household. Prohibiting smoking in all public places will reduce exposure and lead to significant health care savings.

Another powerful lobby stopped two proposals that would have helped deaf and autistic children. Bills that would require insurance policies and plans to cover the cost of hearing aids or cochlear implants for children under 11 years of age, as well as the cost of treatment of autism passed the Senate, but not the Assembly.

Getting Things Done

I learned early in life that if you want to get things done, you need to work with others. As a new legislator, I learned that in some cases having your name on a bill was not the best way to get something accomplished. As Ronald Reagan put it, there is no limit to what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit.

As your representative I always looked for ways to work across partisan and generational lines in order to get things done for you. In my very first newsletter I said that a good idea is a good idea no matter whose idea it is. 14 years have only strengthened my conviction that insisting on taking credit is not the way to be an effective legislator.

When I talk with 4th graders about state government, I explain how I work with like-minded colleagues no matter what party or part of the state they come from. I'm proud of the work I've done

These are two serious health problems that, if not treated early, can lead to a lifetime of difficulty for the child and increased costs for society. Insurance is designed to spread the risk; it makes no sense to let the insurance companies routinely exclude these conditions and force families to go it alone.

Pure self interest was behind the failure of the legislature to act on a proposal that I have been pushing for years. Back in 1995, during my first term in office, I was one of a small group of legislators who introduced a bill to take away legislators' ability to cash in unused sick leave when they retire and use it to pay for health insurance coverage.

Sick leave benefits are a way of ensuring that an employee's pay is not cut when they miss work because of an illness. A legislator's pay is never reduced, no matter how much work they miss. Voters are the ones who impose a penalty if a legislator misses too much work. It makes no sense to give sick leave to legislators; I have given my word that I will not use this benefit.

Unfortunately, the proposal went nowhere. I raised the issue in 2001, when Former Governor Thompson retired with over \$200,000 in accumulated sick leave, and again in 2003, when I asked all my colleagues to sign onto another bill ending this practice. It was only after the press started writing about this benefit that my colleagues decided it was time to do something.

behind the scenes on bills that many people had no idea I worked on.

This session I collaborated with the chair of the Assembly Public Health Committee, Representative "Doc" Hines (R-Oxford), on legislation requiring that all cigarettes sold in Wisconsin be made from self-extinguishing materials. These "Fire Safe Cigarettes" stop burning within a specified period of time if they are not smoked.

Cigarettes are the leading cause of home fire fatalities. They are responsible for 25 % of all fire-related deaths and cause about \$550 million in damages annually. 22 other states already have fire safe cigarette laws. I was honored to be able to help pass this life-saving legislation in Wisconsin. As John F. Kennedy said, we shouldn't seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer.

Town Hall Meetings with

Representative Wasserman

JUNE

Shorewood Public Library

Village Center Conference Room
3920 N. Murray Avenue
Wednesday, June 4th
6:30pm – 7:30pm

Whitefish Bay Public Library

Second Floor
5420 N. Marlborough Drive
Wednesday, June 4th
8:00pm – 9:00pm

North Shore Library

Community Room
6800 N. Port Washington Road
Wednesday, June 18th
7:30pm – 8:30pm

Instead of voting on my proposal, which dealt with legislators, Assembly leadership passed an expanded version that they knew would not make it through the State Senate. As expected, the Senate refused to take up the Assembly version and legislators are still collecting this outrageous perk.

These are just a few examples of the public good taking a back seat to special interests. Wisconsin used to be known for good government. I hope that we can find our way back soon.

Reducing Government Spending

Times are tough. Families are pinching pennies. Everyone is looking for ways to save money. Unfortunately, elected officials, despite their rhetoric, are not doing enough. Tightening the belt is difficult. But we must restore fiscal responsibility if we are going to compete in a today's global economy. We need to find the fat and cut it, and that is exactly what I have tried to do.

I introduced a number of bills this session that would save millions of dollars. Reducing wasteful spending and eliminating overpayments will help relieve the burden on taxpayers. Some of my proposals involve big changes, like reducing the number of counties in Wisconsin by 75%. Others involve smaller initiatives, like eliminating duplicative state payments and making sure the state doesn't pay more than is charged to the general public for certain services.

Unfortunately, I could not change the business-as-usual mindset in the Capitol. Too many politicians talk about cutting taxes, but when it comes to making the hard decisions they get cold feet.

In the private sector businesses must make those hard decisions. Successful business owners are constantly on the lookout for ways to maximize efficiency.

Government should do the same. Wisconsin has a population of 5.5 million and 72 counties. The State of California has a population of over 33.8 million, but

gets by with only 58 counties. This makes no sense. We cannot afford to keep dumping money into an old and inefficient system.

I introduced legislation that would create a task force charged with developing a plan to reduce the number of counties to 18 or less. Consolidating and streamlining county government can reduce bureaucracy without imperiling county services.

In 2005 Wisconsin Counties spent over \$4.6 billion. If we can cut that figure by 10%, taxpayers could save over \$460 million. This is what taxpayers are looking for, real property tax savings. You do not have to make sweeping changes in order to save money. Sometimes it is the seemingly small changes that add up to real savings.

When you or I go to the car dealer to buy a car, the starting point is the sticker price. I can't imagine walking up to the salesperson and saying that you want to pay twice the price on the sticker. Why would anyone in their right mind pay more than the asking price?

Unbelievable as it may sound, the state pays each voucher school a set amount for each voucher student, even if it is two, three or four times more than the amount the school charges non-voucher students. Wisconsin is the only state with a publicly-funded voucher program that pays more than the school's asking price.



Representative Wasserman raises questions at a committee hearing.

The state should pay the same for voucher students as non-voucher students pay. Conservative estimates show that this change could save the taxpayers over \$40 million a year. I was disappointed when my effort to have this proposal integrated into a larger education reform package failed.

I also tried to save money by ending duplicative payments to parents for driving their children to school. Currently school boards are required to provide transportation for students to and from school, including those attending private schools. Some school boards opt to reimburse parents for transporting their children. State law requires payment for each child, even when there are multiple siblings driven in the same vehicle to the same school.

I proposed changing this to make it "one family, one school, one check." If a family has more than one child attending the same school, they would only receive one reimbursement check. This change would save school districts across the state millions of dollars each year.

Unfortunately, my colleagues failed to take these opportunities to save money. Talk is cheap, cutting government spending is harder. Wisconsin needs to return to the innovative "outside of the box" thinking that we are famous for. Working together, we can cut spending and once again restore fiscal responsibility to state government.

Join My E-mail Club

Over the last few years I have been sending out periodic updates on what's happening in Madison to those individuals who have joined my E-Mail Club. Membership is free and entitles "subscribers" to receive the latest information on the workings of state government and my activities as your state representative.

The first e-mail update that you will receive will have to wait until after the statewide elections in November. Wisconsin's election rules prohibit incumbent legislators who are running for elected office from sending out "mass" constituent communications between June 1st and November 4th. But I will resume mailings after the election. At that time I will give all e-mail club members an opportunity to have their name and address removed from the list before I give it to my successor.

You can join by sending me an e-mail message at Rep.Wasserman@legis.wi.gov indicating that you would like your name added to the list of E-Mail Club members. Please be sure to include your name and address for our records.