

Jim Steineke: Asking for your support to change Wisconsin's bail laws

Posted on Thursday, Jan 18, 2018

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Article I, Section 8 of the Wisconsin Constitution contains the rules judges must follow when setting bail. Recently this section of the Wisconsin Constitution led to an innocent woman losing her life. Article I, Section 8 of the Wisconsin Constitution needs to change.

Changing state statutes requires a process you may be familiar with: a legislator from either the Assembly or Senate introduces a bill, which receives a hearing and a vote in committee, then a vote by the full body. Once both houses pass the bill, the Governor signs it, and it becomes law. The process to change the Constitution is more work, and although it has been done a few times in recent years, it is by no means an easy lift for the public. So today, I am writing this column to ask you to commit to this process, which requires more input and a broader base of support.

Let's start with the reason we need action. Currently, a judge is only able to take into account a limited number of factors when assessing bail, the main one being "a reasonable basis to believe that the conditions are necessary to assure appearance in court." Things they are unable to take into account include the seriousness of the offense, a person's previous criminal record, and their likelihood to commit certain crimes if they are released on bail.

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We have seen cases all over the state where a person who should have a very high bail is instead held for a low limit and released back into the community. Just recently in our area, we saw an unspeakable tragedy unfold where a man who had

no business walking the streets murdered his wife after posting a bond of \$10,000. Simply put, our laws failed that woman and her children. Unfortunately, changing those laws will not be easy.

In order to amend the Wisconsin Constitution, both houses of the legislature must pass the exact same resolution in two consecutive sessions – that could be as much as four years apart. Once that is done, it goes to a statewide vote for every Wisconsinite to approve or deny the change. A change like this requires grassroots support and a sustained effort. I think the collective will of the people in the Fox Valley can get behind something like this. Fortunately, Republican Representative Cindi Duchow from Waukesha has already introduced a constitutional amendment. It echoes efforts other states have made, including our neighboring ones, and I think it deserves broad, bipartisan support.

Patterns of domestic violence are despicable. There is no reason why repeat offenders should get the chance to do it again. While awaiting their constitutional right to a speedy public trial, we should not be giving them any opportunity to further victimize our fellow citizens. Please join me in this effort.

— Steineke, R-Kaukauna, represents the 5th Assembly District and serves as Assembly majority leader.