

Shilling says GOP too focused on opposing Evers to lead on key issues

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Senate Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling said GOP lawmakers have failed to lead on issues such as helping the middle class and addressing homelessness, because they've been unable to agree with each other and focused on opposing the gov.

The La Crosse Dem told WisPolitics.com in a year-end interview her caucus stands ready with packages to address childcare costs impacting middle-class families, retirement security, global climate change and chronic wasting disease. They hope to push the ideas in the waning days of the two-year session next year.

Shilling also hoped GOP legislative leaders would be willing to work with Dem Gov. Tony Evers on his call to address mental health in the wake of two incidents at Wisconsin high schools involving safety officers and students who brought weapons to school.

"I just don't see those ideas coming from the Republicans," Shilling said in her Capitol office. "They really have been the party of no and obstruction this year with the governor in an effort to really minimize him and to minimize the success the governor could have."

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Shilling acknowledged "communication goes both ways" and said there have been growing pains for the gov's staff, like she said there are for any new administration. Still, she said efforts by Evers to improve relations have received a cold reception from GOP leaders.

"There just has been a level of pettiness that we have seen toward him and the administration, and it's difficult," Shilling said. "We can do better. I think Wisconsin deserves better."

Looking to the 2020 elections, Shilling said Dems can't just play defense if they want to someday win back the majority.

Republicans now enjoy a 19-14 majority, and Shilling is one of three GOP targets next fall after she narrowly won reelection in 2016 over former state Sen. Dan Kapanke, R-La Crosse. Republicans are also targeting Sen. Patty Schachtner, D-Somerset, after she won a seat in a 2018 special election that President Trump won by 17 points in 2016 and state Sen. Dave Hansen, D-Green Bay.

Hansen won reelection in 2016 even as Trump won his district. Shilling said she hasn't had a conversation yet with Hansen on whether he's running again, saying she typically does that in the spring. Still, she said he was working on legislation when she ran into him earlier this week in Madison before he hustled back to the district for events.

She predicted her GOP colleagues would have to answer "for their inaction" over the past several years on issues important to voters. Shilling also predicted there would be "buyers remorse" for voters who had backed Trump in 2016 only to be turned off by his governing style.

In her own race, Kapanke hasn't publicly indicated his plans for 2020. But Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, told a WisPolitics.com luncheon earlier this year he expected Kapanke to run. Kapanke hasn't returned repeated calls from WisPolitics.com in recent months.

Shilling beat him in a 2011 recall election before her narrow win in 2012. She finished with a 61-vote win after a recount.

"I still look around a room, and I'll count to 61," Shilling said. "That's never lost on me, and I never take anything for granted."

Shilling also predicted a different dynamic in the GOP Senate caucus if Fitzgerald is successful in his bid for the 5th CD.

Fitzgerald is currently unopposed for the GOP nomination in the heavily Republican seat and a strong favorite to succeed U.S. Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner, R-Menomonee Falls, barring a significant change in the field.

Shilling said Fitzgerald has been "skilled at threading the needle" with a GOP caucus that has a broad spectrum of viewpoints that she said has moved farther to

the right overall.

“Whoever is the next leader will have their hands full,” Shilling said.

She also needled Fitzgerald, 56, over his congressional bid, cracking, “He’s never too old to be a freshman.”

Listen to the interview:

https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/191211_1000a/s-b8tpg