

# Bill Kaplan: Senator Baldwin fights for retirees

Posted on Monday, Nov 11, 2019

*The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.*

Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin has a first-rate personality, impressive political skills and a social conscience. She long ago made the transition from representing the Madison area Second Congressional District to the entire state. One issue that Baldwin has singularly led on is economic security for retirees. No surprise for someone raised by her grandparents.

In December, 2016 Baldwin drove to Milwaukee during a heavy snowstorm to meet with the Milwaukee-SE Committee to Protect Pensions. Bob Amsden, one of the group's leaders, told me there were about 170 retirees and supporters there. Baldwin spoke about the financially troubled Central States Pension Fund (CSPF), which covers 400,000 Americans including 25,000 Wisconsinites. The CSPF and other similar pension fund plans "are projected to become insolvent over the next decade due to investment losses from the (2008) financial crisis, jobs moving overseas, industry deregulation and other factors" (Pension Rights Center). The retirement benefits of 1.5 million Americans are at risk.

Baldwin told the retirees - Democrats, Republicans and independents: "Congress must go back to the table to come up with a workable and bipartisan solution". She became one of the first sponsors of the Butch Lewis Act, named after Lewis, a Vietnam War veteran and pension activist. "The measure would help pension plans sponsored by several employers ... by giving (low-cost) loans to insolvent plans (to make investments that are not risky) so they can continue to distribute the promised retirement benefits" (Washington Post).

**>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

In July, the Democratic-led House passed the bipartisan Butch Lewis Act. 29 GOP representatives, including Wisconsin firebrand Sean Duffy, joined all Democrats in voting for the legislation. Wisconsin Democratic Representative Ron Kind said: “By passing the Butch Lewis Act, Congress is helping ensure that thousands of Wisconsinites have access to their earned benefits and a secure future and it is done in a fiscally responsible way”. Wisconsin pension rights leader Amsden was thrilled to meet House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. He told me that Wisconsin retirees had persuaded Duffy to vote for the bill.

Senator Baldwin is a lead sponsor, with 35 other senators, of S.2254 – Butch Lewis Act of 2019. She recently tweeted: “I’m on the Senate floor to once again call on the Senate to take action and keep our pension promises to nearly 25,000 workers and retirees in (Wisconsin) who have paid into the Central States Pension Fund. Mitch McConnell should allow a vote on the Butch Lewis Act.” What will Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson do?

The hour is late and the situation dire. “Retirees (facing pension cuts) have told us they’re going to lose their houses, they can’t pay their medical bills – and they are panic-stricken. The rug has been pulled out from under them” (Pension Rights Center). Moreover, conservative American Enterprise Institute economist Alex Brill said that if the CSPF plan collapsed 55,000 jobs would disappear and over \$1 billion in federal taxes and another \$450 million in state and local taxes would be lost. Listen to Baldwin.

Passing the Butch Lewis Act will help retirees.

— Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the *Wisconsin State Journal* from 1995 – 2009.