

GOP budget clears Assembly with support of four Dems

Posted on Wednesday, Jun 30, 2021

The state Assembly voted 64-34 late Tuesday to approve an \$89.2 billion two-year state budget that would cut state income and local property taxes \$3.4 billion over the next two years, while gutting many of the proposals that Gov. Tony Evers had proposed.

The GOP-authored budget would also put \$129 million into broadband expansion — though most of it through bonding. It would also increase transportation spending by \$357.3 million over current law — using less borrowing than the gov proposed while utilizing more general purpose revenue to cover the costs. And it would end a decade-long freeze on in-state undergraduate tuition at the UW System.

The GOP budget also rejected the gov's call to expand Medicaid through the Affordable Care Act, legalize marijuana and increase taxes by \$1 billion.

Still, four Dems joined all 60 Republicans in supporting the budget. It now goes to the Republican-run state Senate.

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Rep. Steve Doyle, of Onalaska, was joined by fellow Dems Deb Andraca, of Whitefish Bay; Beth Meyers, of Bayfield; and Don Vruwink, of Milton; in voting yes.

Doyle said his vote for the budget, which some of his colleagues called harmful, wasn't one of joy, but sadness. Still, he predicted the gov would rework the plan with his partial veto authority, similar to what he did two years ago.

"I'm not sure it's harmful. I just don't think it's helpful," Doyle said. "But I have confidence our governor will exercise his veto pen to turn it into a budget that I think will be helpful to our state."

Two years ago, all Dems and three Republicans voted against the budget in the Assembly before Evers signed the document after using his broad partial veto authority. That put Dems in the awkward spot of unanimously voting against a budget that Evers would later champion after making changes.

Going into today's vote, insiders were watching for Dem support of the budget as a gauge of whether Evers would sign this version.

Rep. Evan Goyke, D-Milwaukee, knocked the GOP version of the budget, saying it was driven by an anti-Evers hysteria. He jokingly urged his Republican colleagues to get vaccinated against "Evers fever" and demanded to know what the Republican vision was for the state. He pointed to other GOP-run states that have proposed new, innovative programs. Instead, the centerpiece of the Wisconsin Republican plan is a tax cut paid for with a surplus that Goyke said was driven by the latest stimulus package President Biden signed and the successful roll out of the COVID-19 vaccine Evers has overseen.

"What's the new idea? Where are you taking us? What is your vision? You have defined success by comparing yourself to Tony Evers," Goyke said.

But Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, countered the ideas from Evers' February budget amounted to a tired liberal wish list of one government program after another. He said that's why one of the first moves Republicans took in rewriting the document was to strip out many of the gov's ideas.

He argued the only answer that Dems seem to have is to turn to the government for answers.

"If I look at the fastest growing states, they aren't the ones that have the fastest growing government," Vos said.

Vos predicted Evers will sign the budget.

In the lead up Evers sought various ways to pressure Republicans to accept the federal money to add 90,000 Wisconsinites to Medicaid, a program for the state's working poor, children, elderly, those with disabilities and pregnant women. Some 1.4 million Wisconsinites are now covered.

The move would've resulted in \$1.4 billion in additional federal money to help cover the cost of the expansion along with a savings of \$634 million in state tax dollars. In

addition, the federal government added a \$1 billion sweetener for states that accepted the expansion, and Evers had pledged to use that money to fund a string of projects in GOP districts.

Rep. Sara Rodriguez, D-Brookfield, said her GOP colleagues often talk about making wise investments with state tax dollars, but were turning their backs on the opportunity to do more for Wisconsin.

“To not accept these funds is not only a bad business decision, it’s the exact opposite of what my colleague says they value,” said Rodriguez, who was a nurse and health care exec before joining the Assembly. “It is fiscally irresponsible to not take \$1 billion in additional revenue and provide health care to the most vulnerable Wisconsinites.”

But Joint Finance Co-chair Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam, argued the expansion wasn’t needed because Republicans had found ways to use state tax dollars to cover increases for a host of health care services.

He also noted there are coverage options for Wisconsinites that don’t include expanding a government program. That includes subsidized coverage through the exchanges under the Affordable Care Act.

The amendment was tabled along party lines.

“The expansion of welfare is not needed to make these investments in health care,” Born said.

Republicans also rejected Dem amendments that sought to increase state aid to K-12 schools to be more in line with what Evers had proposed, restore the gov’s environmental proposals to the document and put more state aid into higher education as he wanted. Another failed amendment sought to create an independent commission to redraw political boundaries.

The GOP-controlled Joint Finance Committee used \$4.4 billion in unexpected revenue growth over the next two years to add the tax cut package to the budget.

It includes nearly \$2.4 billion to reduce the state’s third tax bracket of 6.27 percent to 5.3 percent, effective Jan. 1. The bracket applies to income between \$23,930 and \$263,480 for single filers, and roughly half of Wisconsinites would benefit from the reduction.

According to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, those making \$25,000 to \$30,000 a year who would qualify for the break would see an average decrease in their tax bill of \$115. For those making \$250,000 to \$300,000, the cut would be an average of \$2,283.

The GOP tax package also included \$202.4 million to repeal the personal property tax, which applies to business equipment such as the ovens owned by restaurants. That money would be used to backfill the lost property tax revenue local governments now collect from the tax.

While the budget included the funds to backfill the lost revenue, the actual repeal of the tax was included in a trailer bill the Assembly also was to take up Tuesday.