

# State Rep. Vruwink: What I heard at state budget hearing

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UW-Whitewater hosted the first of three public hearings on the state budget on April 9. I'm pleased that the first of the "road show" hearings was held in my district. Other hearings followed in Rhinelander and Menomonie. The fourth and final hearing will be held online on Wednesday, April 28.

I want to thank UW-Whitewater for hosting a well-organized event, with distancing between people seated in the Irving L. Young auditorium, mandatory face coverings, and microphone cleansing when people chose to take their masks off to speak. The University also set up an excellent audio/visual system so that people in line to testify knew when it was their turn to come to the microphone.

I was impressed with the people who waited patiently for their turn to testify - 153 in all, as well as the 15 who registered without speaking. People traveled from Green Bay, Oshkosh, Milwaukee and Madison, but the largest number of people who testified came from closer to home.

As a university town, it was understandable that 24 people asked the Joint Finance Committee to fund the UW System with more state support. Seventeen people asked specifically for more state funding for UW-Whitewater, which receives less funding per student than the other schools in the UW System.

I want to note that the Governor's budget proposal includes increased funding for UW-System operations; continuing the tuition freeze; state reimbursement to campuses for the lost revenue from the tuition freeze; and increasing financial aid for students from low-income and moderate-income families.

The Governor has proposed \$59 million to upgrade UW-W's Winther Hall, which is home to classes for aspiring teachers. UW-Whitewater graduates more future teachers than any other college in Wisconsin, public or private.

During the hearing, UW-Whitewater opened the doors to Winther Hall for public tours. I joined one of the tours to get a first-hand look at how outdated the facilities are, including access for students with disabilities. There is exactly one elevator to get between floors and it routinely breaks, making students miss classes or be late for classes.

At the hearing, 18 people spoke in favor of increased funding for public schools and special education. They support the Governor's proposal to return to the 1990's-era pledge of providing state aid for two-thirds of local school costs. Six people spoke in favor of increasing state reimbursement for special education costs from 20 percent to 50 percent. This will allow schools to direct more of their property tax dollars to regular education.

Prison and criminal justice reform were another priority we heard. Speakers said allowing a judge to reduce the term of a person's extended supervision if they meet all the criteria would help them continue their progress toward becoming a contributing member of society.

Also, expanding the conditions for which an individual may have his or her criminal conviction expunged would help them get back into the workforce at a time when "Help Wanted" signs are everywhere.

Many people write to me in support of extending the Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund. We heard the same at the listening session. The Stewardship Fund was created in 1989 to preserve natural habitats, protect water quality and fisheries, and expand opportunities for outdoor recreation. The Stewardship Fund gives the DNR authority to award grants to local government and non-profits for such things as park infrastructure, boat launches, trails, and land purchases for preservation.

In recent years, demand for Stewardship grants has far exceeded available funds. Gov. Evers proposed designating \$70 million per year for the Stewardship Fund for the next 10 years. Since the pandemic caused the shut-down of many gathering places, people have flocked to our public parks and other recreation areas. This experience has demonstrated the value of hiking, biking, fishing, and other outdoor activities. Nature is great therapy.

Other frequently mentioned topics during the public hearing were mental health, Medicaid expansion, help for the blind and deaf, and caregiver funding. By my count, 98 percent of the speakers spoke in favor of measures in the Governor's budget proposal. Let's hope the Joint Finance Committee members heard the same.

Please email me with your comments and questions about the state budget at [Rep.Vruwink@legis.wisconsin.gov](mailto:Rep.Vruwink@legis.wisconsin.gov).