

Bill Kaplan: The economy, Rebecca Cooke and hope

Posted on Monday, Jul 17, 2023

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The latest federal economic data is very good news. “A year after inflation soared to the highest level in four decades, price increases are returning closer to normal levels, with families and businesses feeling the difference as wages rise faster than prices Government data released (July 12) showed a notable drop in inflation: Prices rose 3 percent in June compared with the year before, and 0.2 percent compared with May, the smallest 12-month increase since March 2021” (Washington Post). Similarly, U.S. unemployment remains historically low at 3.6 percent, and 2.4 percent in Wisconsin.

However, the polls don’t reflect this positive data. Many in the country seem unmoved by the impressive job growth and economic development. The Biden administration, a Democratic-led Congress (2021-2023) and some GOP lawmakers passed critical legislation: the infrastructure bill, Chips Act and climate change-healthcare bill. While some GOP lawmakers voted for the first two bills, all Wisconsin GOP lawmakers opposed the first two bills and most opposed the third bill (Representative Mike Gallagher didn’t vote).

Critical federal funding for Wisconsin is pouring in to expand access to high-speed internet (more than \$1 billion) and \$billions for bridges, roads, other transportation projects, drinking water, wastewater systems, airports and more. Likewise, Wisconsin will benefit significantly from federal funding provided by the Chips Act and climate change-healthcare bill. But as NYT columnist David Brooks pointed out “Biden isn’t getting the credit he deserves.” Why?

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The U.S., including Wisconsin, remains divided, demoralized, polarized and traumatized. COVID killed 1.1 million Americans, including over 14,500 Wisconsinites. There have been more than 104 million U.S. cases, including about 1.8 million in Wisconsin. “But the main problem is national psychology. Americans’ satisfaction with their personal lives is nearly four times as high as their satisfaction with the state of the nation. That’s likely because during the Trump era we ... suffered a collective moral injury, a collective loss of confidence, a loss of faith in ourselves as a nation” (David Brooks).

The January 6, 2021 assault on the Capitol remains Exhibit A. America’s top military leaders, the Joint Chiefs of Staff said: “The violent riot in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021 was a direct assault on the U.S. Congress, the Capitol building, and our Constitutional process.” However, Wisconsin GOP Representative Derrick Van Orden was there on January 6. He has never come clean about his presence and involvement, including violating his military oath to support and defend the Constitution.

Luckily, the 3rd congressional district 2024 election will be contested by Democrat Rebecca Cooke (she won 11 out of 19 counties in the 2022 Democratic primary). Cooke is from west central Wisconsin and comes “from a long line of dairy farmers” This working class candidate knows rural Wisconsin and how to approach voters, no matter their party affiliation. Cooke’s energy, passion, smarts and work ethic is an antidote to our angst. She projects empathy and hope. Moreover, Cooke will fight for rural Wisconsin, including economically squeezed dairy farmers. Go Rebecca Cooke!

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