

Sen. Hesselbein: Want less government debt? Look no further than our own Gov. Evers

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It's one thing to prepare – and save – for a rainy day, it's yet another to prevent one.

Those calling for reduced government debt and budgets that are truly responsible to our state's future need look no further than our own Governor Tony Evers. Among the most impressive aspects of Governor Evers' responsible budgeting are the unprecedented steps to reduce and prevent state debt.

In addition to another \$500 million into the state's rainy day fund, which serves as a guardrail against future downturns and budget shortfalls – and is already at record levels after two Evers' budgets – the Governor has proposed critical investments that reduce and prevent state debt.

There are several areas of the state budget that involve significant debt-based investment, and two leading areas are Transportation and the state's building program. Each of those see significant and positive action in the Governor's current budget proposal.

Prior to Governor Evers' term in office, we heard a great deal about reduced funding actually going into our roads and other transportation priorities as spiraling debt ate up more and more of the Transportation budget.

Governor Evers' budget would reduce debt in the DOT budget, freeing up vital resources for roads, trails, rail, transit and critical Transportation infrastructure. The Governor in this budget has proposed \$380 million specifically to pay down

Transportation-related debt.

Coupled with shared revenue proposals we've covered earlier, the infusion allows more resources to be committed to vital transportation investments in our communities, including 4% hikes in general Transportation Aids, to our counties, towns and municipalities that maintain nearly 90% of the state's road miles. For example in the five counties of the 27th Senate District, counties maintain 1,826 miles, towns and municipalities 7,397 and the state 1,193 miles.

By specifically paying down debt in this budget, Governor Evers' proposal would take state debt down to less than 15% of the Transportation budget – the lowest since a steep climb in debt began a decade ago.

With revenue estimates showing reason for caution in upcoming budget, Governor Evers made the wise decision to invest a significant amount of the one-time surplus wisely by not only paying down debt, but avoiding it where we can.

Among those choices was the decision was the decision to infuse more cash up front into capital budget than the last 6 biennial budgets (12 years) combined. The \$1.9 Billion investment will allow the building program that is so vital to state services and our economy to move forward with – not coincidentally – the lowest amount of new bonding in at least 12 years.

With important projects in all of our communities, the capital budget is one of the often under-sung aspects of the state budget. This capital budget proposal includes projects across the district, including improvements at tourism hubs like Devil's Lake, repairs to the Stewart Tunnel in Green County and trail upgrades in Cross Plains.

That's why I'm so happy to see Governor Evers' significant investment in our state's infrastructure and his dedication of policy and resources to do so with a minimum of new debt. In 2021 alone under our Governor's leadership Wisconsin returned to a AAA bond rating for the first year since 1982 – when the Epcot Center opened, Michael Jackson released his album Thriller and ET rode his bicycle past the moon.

After a decade of credit card borrowing that hiked the state's debt service and sapped resources for direct investment, Governor Evers has put forward a proposal that will truly pay off in the years and decades ahead. Even as our students and citizens are able to make use of the infrastructure resulting from these investments,

future budgeters have the opportunity to look back on the 2023 state budget as one that answered the call for reduced debt and prudent investments.