

UW Board of Regents rejects deal with Vos that targeted DEI positions

Posted on Saturday, Dec 9, 2023

The Universities of Wisconsin Board of Regents on Saturday rejected a deal with Assembly Speaker Robin Vos that sought to freeze DEI positions in exchange for a series of financial priorities, including the Legislature signing off on pay raises for UW employees.

The 9-8 vote came after a series of regents made impassioned pleas against limiting diversity, equity and inclusion positions, warning it would only encourage GOP lawmakers to seek further tradeoffs.

Under the agreement, Vos, R-Rochester, had agreed to sign off on the pay raises, release \$32 million in state funding for the university and approve a host of building projects. In all, it included some \$800 million in funding.

It came after Vos had blocked the pay raises and funding for an engineering building on the UW-Madison campus, among other university priorities, demanding that DEI positions be eliminated.

>> 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.](#)

Vos said the deal came after almost six months of negotiations and was “our best and final offer.”

“It’s a shame they’ve denied employees their raises and the almost \$1 billion investment that would have been made in the UW System to continue their ideological campaign to force students to believe only one viewpoint is acceptable on campus,” Vos said.

Regent Edmund Manydeeds predicted the engineering building will get done eventually because the public and Wisconsin employers want it. He added UW

employees will get their pay raises, pointing to a lawsuit Dem Gov. Tony Evers has filed against the Legislature for blocking various actions.

Manydeeds, who is Native American, shared with the board his experience when he was 5 years old of being sent to a government school where kids were taken away from their families and banned from practicing their faith, speaking their language, dressing how they want or growing their hair long. He said he had no hope while at that school and didn't learn anything during the four years he spent there.

"I am not going to take hope away from anybody. Doing this is going to take hope away from somebody," said Manydeeds, who was appointed to the board by Dem Gov. Tony Evers.

Regent Mike Jones called the deal imperfect, but urged support for it. He said the deal was an opportunity to redesign the university's approach to diversity and "it's not a walkaway." Jones, who was appointed to the board by former GOP Gov. Scott Walker, stressed the various financial benefits of the package.

"It keeps our business running and gives people hope," Jones said.

Many of the regents focused their comments on the provision in the deal that calls for freezing the number of diversity, equity and inclusion positions — including those currently vacant — through Dec. 31, 2026. A third of those positions — 43 jobs — would be realigned to focus on academic and student success or left unfilled through attrition.

The nine who voted to reject the deal were all Evers appointees, including Board President Karen Walsh.

The eight who supported it included the three remaining Walker members and Mark Tyler, the Wisconsin Technical College System Board representative. State Superintendent Jill Underly, an ex-officio member like Tyler, was out of the country and didn't participate in the Zoom meeting.

Such divisions are rare on the board, which typically approves resolutions overwhelmingly.

"I'm really at a loss to provide guidance to you all," Walsh said ahead of the vote. "We will vote with our hearts based on this. There will be consequences either way, and I respect anyone's vote in any direction that they feel compelled to do."

Evers said he understood and supported the regents' decision. He also called for discussions to continue on investing in the university, including the Madison engineering building, and demanded Republicans to sign off on the employee pay raises and \$32 million in state aid.

"It's clear the regents are deeply divided over this proposal, have immense concerns about this process and the difficult position they were put in, and are all committed to their charge — doing what's best for our past, present, and future students, faculty, and staff, and the institutions that have defined our state for generations," Evers said.

The resolution the board rejected sought to commit the university to:

- seek donations to create an endowed chair to focus on "conservative political thought, classical economic theory, or classical liberalism";
- not renew its Target of Opportunity Program seeking to recruit diverse faculty and instead create a program to recruit faculty to mentor "at risk" or underrepresented students";
- eliminate the use of diversity statements in admissions;
- create a module related to freedom of expression for incoming undergraduate students; and
- support a bill to create a guaranteed admission program for students ranked in the top 5 and 10% of their class.

In exchange, Vos pledged the Legislature would approve:

- pay raises and trades contracts for UW employees by Dec. 31;
- \$32 million in funding to be used for workforce development efforts;
- capital projects including the UW-Madison engineering building, \$78.5 million for the Winther/Heide Hall project at UW-Whitewater and \$79.2 million for residence hall renovations at UW-Madison;
- \$16 million for the state's tuition reciprocity agreement with Minnesota;
- \$45.4 million to demolish unused or uninhabitable university facilities; and
- \$149.3 million for Universities of Wisconsin utilities projects.

See the [overview](#).