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Rep. Jill Billings Column:
Investments in State Infrastructure Creates Jobs, Boosts Local Economies, and Saves State Dollars

For those of you who own a home, you know that purchasing your home isn't your last investment. Through the years there are leaky faucets that need replacing, a new roof after 10-15 years of wear, a furnace that has hit its lifespan, and maybe even new windows to mitigate drafts and improve energy efficiency. As is the case when you are the State of Wisconsin and own 99 million square feet of public building space, you need to make these investments over the years as well.

The State Building Commission is the governmental body that oversees the implementation of a long-range building program for the state. The building program doesn't solely involve building new structures. In fact, most of the long-range plan addresses how we maintain and improve the facilities the state already owns. Every two years, the governor compiles a list of state building investment priorities and the State Building Commission votes on approving or rejecting the recommendations put forth.

Last week, the State Building Commission met to review Governor Evers' first capital budget. Governor Evers' recommendations prioritized over eighty projects statewide that focused on safety upgrades, refurbishment and replacement, and previously deferred maintenance projects. It focused on strategic investment and wherever possible leveraged private funding. His recommendations included fixing aging state facilities, revamping university science buildings built in the 1960s, addressing the failures at Lincoln Hills Juvenile Detention Facility, creating an economic-generator hub in rural Wisconsin, and making vital safety upgrades to veteran's homes and mental health facilities.

It is estimated that the state investment in the projects that Governor Evers recommended would create over 40,000 jobs and \$4.5 billion in economic activity statewide.

However, at this time we don't know the fate of any of the eighty-two proposed projects. During the State Building Commission meeting, in which members vote to approve or reject these recommendations, the Republican members voted against all eighty-two projects. This is an unprecedented move, as it has never occurred in the known history of the State Building Commission. Even in 2003, when the membership of the commission had the same political



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division, the commission voted projects forward. This year, the Republicans refused to support any project, thus causing all projects to fail.

The blanket Republican vote against these projects creates an uncertain future of each project. It could also hamper some of the private funds designated to projects, as with an uncertain future, fundraising efforts are curtailed. It's also estimated that every year these projects are delayed the project's total cost will increase by four percent due to inflation. The legislature's Joint Finance Committee will have the opportunity to add building projects to the state budget, but without recommendation from the State Building Commission, which has the statutory responsibility of providing a list of reviewed projects to the budget committee.

Much like replacing the roof of your house, that new furnace, or that unexpected leaky faucet—it's never "fun" to spend your money on infrastructure improvements. But it's the responsible investment you need make, otherwise it'll cost you more in the future. After years of deferring vital maintenance and safety upgrades, Governor Evers prioritized our state infrastructure to improve our public buildings while creating jobs and boosting local economies statewide.

Although I am frustrated with the outcome of the State Building Commission meeting last week, I'm still advocating for these projects with my colleagues in the legislature. I hope you will join me by calling upon your state representatives and ask them to support Governor Evers' entire capital budget.

Rep. Jill Billings (D-La Crosse) is a member of the State Building Commission and Chair of the Higher Education Subcommittee.