



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® WISCONSIN

612 W. Main Street, #200
Madison, WI 53703-4714

(608) 256-0827
lwvwi.org

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CONTACT: Andrea Kaminski, Executive Director
608-256-0827; kaminski@lwvwi.org

SUMMARY: LWV COMMENTS ON PROPOSED STATE BUDGET, ASSEMBLY BILL 64/SENATE BILL 30

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin calls on state lawmakers to support a state budget that provides the people of our state a high quality of life and ensures that our communities thrive. This means top-notch education for all of our children and young adults, public transit to get us to family-sustaining jobs, clean air and water, access to affordable healthcare for all Wisconsin residents, and an open, fair and responsive government. This is Wisconsin's tradition, and it is the foundation for long-term sustainability in our state. Following is a summary of the League's statement to state lawmakers as they consider the biennial state budget. The full statement can be found here:

http://www.lwvwi.org/Portals/0/News%20and%20Events/PDFS/LWV_JFCBudgetStatement_5-10-17.pdf

SUPPORT FAIR, HIGH-INTEGRITY ELECTIONS

We urge lawmakers to retain full staffing for the Wisconsin Elections Commission in order to educate voters, combat misinformation and maintain the integrity of our elections.

SUPPORT AN EDUCATED PUBLIC

The League believes the state is responsible to guarantee a public education system committed to the future of all of our children and the communities in which we live. Funding should take into account the varying needs of communities and students, especially as related to the relative affluence of school populations. To increase public funding of private education (vouchers) in any way is unacceptable, especially when private schools are not required to be accountable for reporting on the same measures as public schools.

- We support the Governor's proposal to increase support for public schools. Although it does not make up for the decreases in recent budgets, we strongly urge lawmakers to support it.
- The proposed allocation of funding on a flat per-pupil basis would result in the state's wealthiest districts receiving more proportionally than districts with a larger percentage of low-income families. That unfairness is exacerbated when schools are publicly "graded" without taking into consideration these inequities.
- We oppose the proposed increases for voucher programs, which would result in per-pupil state support for private school students that would be greater than for public school students.

As for **higher education**, we believe the University of Wisconsin System must be strongly supported to ensure the quality of education for all Wisconsin students and the future of our state. The proposed budget would give students in the UW System the opportunity to opt out of paying "segregated fees" which support campus activities, programming and events that are planned by students and are an important part of campus life. This would weaken the quality of college life and learning. This measure should be rejected.

SUPPORT A HEALTHY POPULATION

The League believes that a basic level of quality health care, including mental health care, should be available at an affordable cost to all Wisconsin residents. Overall, the increases proposed in the Governor's budget are welcome but they fall far short of what is needed to support healthy families and communities in our state.

- We urge lawmakers to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for providers of mental health services, which are currently among the lowest in the country.
- We support the proposed increase of nearly \$16 million over the next two years to eliminate the waiting list for long-term supports for children with disabilities. We also support the much-needed, although modest, increases proposed to improve access to mental health services and crisis treatment.

- We urge lawmakers to restore funding for the Dementia Specialist Program, which saves money for the affected families and taxpayers in general. The program should be expanded to all 72 counties.

We oppose the state's petition to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services which would make it possible to restrict eligibility for certain individuals to receive Medicaid benefits.

SUPPORT A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

The League supports science-based regulations, decision-making and public education. We consider Climate Disruption as the most serious threat to public health and the environment that we face as a planet. We need the expertise and experience of staff scientists to help citizens, administrators and lawmakers make sound decisions based on facts in natural resource management. We also need experts who can provide on-going education and communications to citizens to help us understand the issues that go into these decisions.

- Restore funding for the 18.4 FTE Dept. of Natural Resources scientist positions cut in the last budget.

SUPPORT STRONG COMMUNITIES

No money from the General Fund should be transferred to the segregated Transportation Fund, which would result in cuts to other necessary programs such as education and affordable healthcare. Further:

- Less funding should be used on major highway expansion (except for urgent and critical needs).
- An increase of \$34.3 million should be invested in public transit annually over the next biennium.
- Transit funding needs to remain in the Segregated Transportation Fund.

SUPPORT A FAIR TAX SYSTEM

Taken together, the tax-related measures in the Governor's budget proposal would make the Wisconsin tax system more regressive and fail to deal with the serious funding shortfalls in our state budget.

- The proposed individual income tax rate adjustment offers a tax reduction to individuals that is so small (\$2-\$67 per year in 2017), it might be better to have no tax cut and use the funds for needed investment.
- The proposed increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) would boost that tax credit for working parents with one child from roughly \$140 to \$380/per year, restoring part of the 2011 cut to the EITC. But it would not go to the same people whose tax credit was cut in 2011. Furthermore, most of the funding is withdrawn from the TANF Block Grant, which provides services to many of the same individuals.
- The budget would eliminate the Homestead Tax Credit for low-income persons under age 62 except for those with certain disabilities. This loss for many homeowners or renters will reduce their available income.
- The proposed State Tax Holiday has been shown in other states to benefit primarily higher-income people who shift their purchases to that 2-day period. It would reduce state revenue by \$22 million over two years.

MAINTAIN STRONG CITIZEN INPUT AND GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT

The League strongly believes in citizen input and oversight, which protect the public from the political swings in government. We believe that government checks and balances are crucial. We are particularly concerned about proposed changes to two state commissions involving citizen oversight.

- The Wisconsin Judicial Commission should not be placed under the control of the state Supreme Court, given that the job of the commission, sometimes, may be to investigate or discipline a Supreme Court Justice. We were glad to see the Joint Finance Committee has rejected this proposal.
- Maintain the state Parole Commission as an independent body to provide fair review of those prisoners who are eligible to be paroled.

In summary, we urge lawmakers to craft a state budget that serves all Wisconsin residents fairly with vital services, a healthy environment, high-quality education and accountable government. That will reflect Wisconsin values, and it is what the people expect from our state government.

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that advocates for informed and active participation in government. The League welcomes women and men across the state as members. There are 18 local Leagues in Wisconsin. Follow @LWV_WI on Twitter.