



# LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® WISCONSIN

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To: All Wisconsin State Senators and Assembly Representatives

Re: Updated comments on proposed state budget, Assembly Bill 21/Senate Bill 21

We urge you to support a state budget that honors the Wisconsin tradition prioritizing quality of life for residents of our state. The budget should provide us with a high quality of life, which 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 and responsive government. This is Wisconsin's tradition, and it is the foundation for long-term sustainability in our state.

The League of Women Voters' membership in our state has studied many policy issues over the years, taking into account all sides of each debate. From our studies, the League has adopted policy positions in the areas of Government Structures, Social Policy and Natural Resources. Our positions reflect the nonpartisan consensus of our members, who hail from both ends of the political spectrum and the large area of moderation in the middle. Although League members update the positions on an ongoing basis, most of our positions date back to a time long before the current political polarization we see in our government.

Based on the League's positions – and the state budget discussions to-date – we offer the following updated guidance as you consider the proposed state budget in Assembly Bill 21/Senate Bill 21:

## **REVENUES**

We urge you to reject the mistaken impression that Wisconsin cannot afford the level of public services provided in the past and the top-notch institutions which have made our state great. Taxation decisions should not be based on immediate political pressures, in this case simply wanting Wisconsin to be seen as a low-tax state. The League of Women Voters is one of more than 30 citizen groups supporting the Better Choices alternate budget plan, which identifies three actions that would increase revenues by a total of \$782 million, making many of the proposed cuts to programs and services unnecessary. The recommended actions are: accepting \$345 million in federal Medicaid funds for BadgerCare expansion; capping the ballooning tax credit for corporations engaged in manufacturing and agriculture, saving \$226 million; and capping property tax cuts for a second home, which would free up \$211 million.

## **MAINTAIN STRONG CITIZEN INPUT AND GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT**

Perhaps the most alarming part of the proposed budget is that in a number of areas it recommends weakening the checks and balances which protect citizens from political swings in government. An example was the proposal in the original executive budget to reduce the citizen-based Natural Resources Board to an advisory role; we were pleased that the Joint Finance Committee rejected that measure. We also believe that throughout the budget discussions there has been severe encroachment on the authority of locally elected school boards, which are accountable for education in their districts. Such measures are not fiscal matters at all. They are very

significant policy matters that threaten to change the fundamental relationship between the people and our government. We urge you to reject such measures, which deserve more public input than they will have when included in the budget.

### **SUPPORT AN EDUCATED PUBLIC**

Virtually all the education issues of previous concern to the League remain as Joint Finance prepares for a final vote. A number of major concerns for K-12 education include:

- Seriously inadequate funding.
- No increase in property tax revenue limits.
- Increased funding for private education at the expense of public education.
- Large expansion of vouchers for private education.
- Extending voucher availability to special needs students.
- Allowing hiring teachers who lack a bachelor's degree.
- Allowing home-school and private school students to participate in public school sports and extracurricular activities.
- Giving chartering authority to colleges and universities, removing such schools from locally elected school boards.
- Giving authority to Milwaukee County Executive to take over selected schools, removing authority from the local school board, a provision that could be extended to other districts.

There are also major concerns for the University of Wisconsin, especially:

- Drastic reduction in funding after significant reductions in prior years.
- Removal of faculty tenure from Wisconsin state law.

A major concern is the inclusion of numerous fundamental policy proposals in the state budget rather than as stand-alone legislation. In addition, it has been very difficult for the public to follow and respond to these issues, as information has often become available only at the last minute before a decision is made. The League believes that this flawed process and the resulting decisions are likely to have serious long-lasting negative results for Wisconsin's public education on all levels for many years to come.

### **SUPPORT A HEALTHY POPULATION**

We are heartened that the Joint Finance Committee will not recommend the changes initially proposed for **Senior Care**, Wisconsin's prescription drug program for low-income people. Senior Care, which has long had bipartisan support, is a program which serves the people of Wisconsin well.

**Family Care** is a long-term care alternative which would be cut by \$6 million in the second year under the proposed budget. Further, the executive budget moved oversight from a social model (Department of Health Services) to a business model (Office of the Commissioner of Insurance) which reduces consumer and community input to the programs and increases the costs as contracts are awarded without bids and are switched from non-profit to for-profit entities. The budget also proposed to eliminate Aging & Disability Resource Center governing boards and advisory councils. We understand the discussions about long-term care are still in process, but we are concerned about the impact of the proposed changes upon frail, elderly persons.

We remain puzzled by the Governor's decision not to accept the \$345 million, Wisconsin's fair share of federal funding for Medicaid expansion, to support BadgerCare eligibility for childless adults.

### **SUPPORT A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT**

We appreciate that the Joint Finance Committee removed the Governor's proposal to reduce the **Natural Resources Board** (NRB) to an "advisory only" role, which would give all rule-making power to one person, the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, a gubernatorial appointee confirmed by the senate. Structural changes and power grabs such as this have no place in the State Biennial Budget process.

We oppose the proposals to **cut science staff by 66 fulltime positions** at the DNR, specifically targeting the Bureau of Scientific Services and Communication and Education. We need the full-time 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. Otherwise ideology can prevail at the expense of the agency's mission.

The very popular and nonpartisan **Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program** was created in 1989 to safeguard natural land and waters for outdoor recreation and sports. The Governor proposed a freeze on all Stewardship Fund acquisitions until 2028. Fortunately the Joint Committee on Finance restored half the annual funding. But the pressure of continued state population growth and tourism visits will not be met by a limited Fund. Our rich natural resources provide quality of life and support Wisconsin's \$13 billion tourism industry, \$22 billion forestry industry, and \$4 billion hunting and fishing industry.

**Lake Michigan.** We heartily support the proposed directive to eliminate the sunset on collecting ballast water fees to ensure the program's future. We also support the directive to maintain bonding for the Urban Nonpoint Source, Targeted Management Runoff, Contaminated Sediment Removal, and Dam Safety programs. These measures will keep our Lake clean for recreation and protect our waters for a healthy environment.

**Statewide water quality initiatives.** We oppose the proposed cuts in excess of \$6 million to polluted runoff management efforts, which are proven to have a direct and substantial impact on water quality. The cuts will take away state support for urban and agricultural best practices, education, and technical assistance that provide water quality benefits.

The League opposes **policy insertions in the Budget such as Motion 520**, which weakens shoreland zoning and prohibits counties from going beyond the statewide minimum standard, to the detriment of water quality.

### **SUPPORT PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION**

**Public transit** is a small part of the transportation budget, but it makes a huge difference for people who rely on it to get to jobs, interviews, work, child care, government agencies, shopping and other daily business. A modern, efficient system of public transit will help grow Wisconsin's economy, because it attracts young professionals to our communities and helps prevent air pollution and traffic congestion. We urge you to keep public transit as an integral component of the Transportation Fund. In addition we call for a more balanced use of transportation dollars to include more for public transit and local roads and less for unnecessary huge

highway projects. In addition, for public safety and health reasons, we need to keep **Complete Streets** in the budget for those who need to bicycle or walk/run to get to where they need to go or need the exercise.

#### **SUPPORT A SUSTAINABLE CORRECTIONS BUDGET**

We must raise our voices in protest when we view the proposed Corrections budget. While we continue to see severe underfunding of K-12 education and the UW System, the Corrections system has a budget increase based on a projected increase of prisoners.

There has been neither an effort to improve treatment alternatives and diversion nor any move to address the imbalance of the over-long prison stay of “old law” offenders. These are actions which could actually save millions of dollars in Corrections spending.

Instead, this budget continues to base public safety policy on increased prison sentencing and continues on a path of unsustainable costs. We urge this legislature to act responsibly and appoint a task force to address and develop wiser use of our criminal justice funds.

#### **SUMMARY**

We urge you not to allow institutions built over the past century and programs that have served Wisconsinites well for decades to be destroyed. We urge you to craft a state budget that serves all Wisconsin residents fairly with vital services, a healthy environment, high quality education, accountable government and wise use of revenue. That will reflect Wisconsin values, and it is what the people expect from our state.

Thank you.