

UNDER THE DOME

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Duffy Opts Out of U.S. Senate Bid

U.S. Rep. Sean Duffy said he won't run for Wisconsin's U.S. Senate seat in 2018 against incumbent Democrat Tammy Baldwin. The announcement will likely lead to a large field of GOP candidates, with Baldwin being viewed as one of the more vulnerable incumbents up for reelection in 2018, due in part to Trump's surprise win in the state along with midterm election years being historically more favorable for Republicans as Democratic turnout is typically diminished in non-presidential years. That said, observers note midterm elections for those belonging to the party of the President have not been favorable in recent history. Among those eyeing bids are state lawmakers Sen. Leah Vukmir, Rep. Dale Kooyenga, and Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald told reporters he thought Duffy would be the most formidable candidate, and he was waiting on his decision before making one of his own. Fitzgerald argued a contentious and drawn out GOP primary, similar to what took place in 2012, would damage their chances of taking the seat. Madison businessman Eric Hovde is also said to again be considering a run.

Spring Primary Election to Take Place Tuesday

The spring primary election is set to take place Tuesday, February 21st with only one contested statewide race on the ballot. State superintendent Tony Evers will face off against two candidates, John Humphries and Lowell Holtz, both of whom are viewed as being aligned with the Republican Party. The race had been uneventful, until recently, when the two sparred publicly after Humphries accused Holtz of offering a high-paying job at the Department of Public Instruction in exchange for him dropping out of the race. Holtz acknowledged a discussion took place but said it was being misrepresented. Evers did not comment on the matter. The two candidates with the most votes advance to the April 4th general election.

Effort Continues to Eliminate State Treasurer

State Treasurer Matt Adamczyk testified before a legislative committee in support of a constitutional amendment eliminating his position. The amendment was approved by the legislature last session and is now up for a second consideration. It will then need to be approved by voters through a statewide referendum. Adamczyk told lawmakers his position is no longer needed and a waste of taxpayer dollars. Duties of the office have been whittled away in recent years, to the point where the only remaining responsibility is to sit on the three-member Board of Commissioner of Public Lands.

Walker Budget to Include New Bonding Authority for Building Projects

Governor Walker told reporters he is planning to propose \$450 million in new borrowing for state building projects. A summary of Walker's budget proposal, released by his administration, included the new bonding authority, along with \$500 million for transportation-related projects. Although below historical levels, the funding is significant considering Walker's previous budget proposal included no new bonding authority. The governor has started to release details on which projects he hopes to fund, announcing that he would include \$5 million for completion of the St. Ann Center in Milwaukee, which Walker said provides critical services to support the community and care for the most vulnerable.

Election Recount Changes Proposed

Governor Walker signaled support for legislation two lawmakers are circulating that would revamp the recount process. It comes in response to the decision by Green Party candidate Jill Stein to pursue a recount in the 2016 Presidential election, despite garnering only 1% of the overall vote. Under Sen. Devin LeMahieu and Rep. Ron Tusler's bill, candidates would only be able to request a recount in state and local races if they trail the winner by a certain margin - 1% of the total when there are more than 4,000 votes cast, or if they are within 40 votes in races where fewer than 4,000 are cast. Additional changes are being proposed to fees, payments, petition filing deadlines, and deadlines for paying balances owed when a recount is ordered. Walker wouldn't comment on the specifics of the bill but said it was reasonable to limit recounts. Democratic Senate Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling responded by saying the bill was a distraction, arguing Republicans should be focused on more important issues. Jill Stein also weighed in, saying efforts like hers are the only way to ensure people can be completely confident in their votes.

Lawmaker Seeks Repeal of Prescription Drug Mark-up Law

Democratic state Sen. Tim Carpenter introduced legislation to eliminate a requirement that prescription drugs be sold at a price that is below the cost of the merchandise to the seller. The bill comes as debate over the state's Unfair Sales Act continues, with a number of conservative lawmakers vowing to reintroduce legislation that would fully repeal the law. That effort failed last session due to opposition from a number of retailer groups. The law also requires retailers to impose a minimum profit markup on certain products, such as fuel, tobacco and alcoholic beverages. Critics of the Act claim it is unnecessary and hinders competition among retailers, while supporters say its repeal would force businesses to close, and ultimately raise prices for consumers. Sen. Carpenter has said he is targeting only the prescription drug minimum mark-up because of the pressing need to address rising drug costs.

DSPS, DOT Appointments Made

Shake-ups in the Walker administration have continued with Walker announcing the appointment of Laura Gutierrez as Secretary of the Department of Safety and Professional Services. Gutierrez, who comes from an administrative position at St. Anthony, a private school in Milwaukee, assumed the role at DSPS on February 16th. Meanwhile, at the Department of Transportation, Jen Esser was recently named Assistant Deputy Secretary. Esser previously worked in businesses services at the agency and was an aide to state Sen. Tom Tiffany prior to that. DOT has all new executive leadership with Secretary Dave Ross, Deputy Secretary Bob Seitz, and now Esser, having a combined four months of experience running the agency.