

# UNDER THE DOME

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A Periodic Publication from the Municipal Electric Utilities of Wisconsin and our government affairs team at The Kammer Group.

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## HOPE Agenda Bills Advance, Floor Vote Expected in April

Legislation targeting the state's heroin and opioid epidemic has been making its way through Senate and Assembly committees this month and is expected to be scheduled for a vote the first week of April. Part of state Rep. John Nygren's ongoing HOPE Agenda, the eleven bills are based on recommendation from the Governor's Task Force on Opioid Abuse, Co-Chaired by Nygren and Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, which met across the state last year before releasing their findings in January. The measures seek to expand access to opioid antagonists, provide limited immunity to those reporting drug overdoses, bolster treatment and diversion programs, create new positions to fight drug trafficking, create a recovery charter school for high schoolers, and allocate additional funding for mental health programs in schools. Another proposal would allow family members, friends, and others to go through the emergency and involuntary commitment process for a drug-addicted individual, in the same manner current law allows for alcohol addiction. The legislation will be considered in a Special Session of the Legislature, called for by Governor Walker in January to focus on the epidemic. 17 bills have passed as part of the HOPE Agenda since it began in 2013.

## Lawmakers Seek to Prohibit Sale of Water Utilities

Three Democratic lawmakers are looking to prevent the privatization of water utilities in the state under legislation they've introduced dubbed the Save Our Water Act. Under Sen. Chris Larson, Rep. Amanda Stuck, and Rep. Jonathan Brostoff's proposal, a town, village, or city would be prohibited from selling or leasing to an investor-owned public utility any plant or portion of a plant or portion of a plant used to provide water or sewer service. The authors in a press release said the bill is in response to GOP-led efforts last session to allow for the sale of public water and sewer utilities to out of state companies, along with changes to the referendum requirements for those sales to occur. Authored by Republican Sen. Frank Lasee and Rep. Tyler August, that bill passed the Assembly with bipartisan support but never received a vote in the Senate. The Democratic proposal is not expected to advance in the Republican-controlled legislature.

## Walker Approval Rating Edges Up in Recent Marquette University Poll

Governor Walker's approval rating stands at 45% according to a Marquette University Poll released, up slightly from 42% in the last poll conducted in October. In February, Walker unveiled a budget proposal that many observers believe is aimed at positioning himself for a re-election bid in 2018, and could be boosting his poll numbers as it includes significant funding increases for K-12 and the UW System, along with tax cuts. The poll also surveyed opinions on the state's two U.S. Senators, with 39% of respondents approving of the job performance of GOP Sen. Ron Johnson and 40% approving of Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin. Baldwin is up for re-election in 2018 in what is expected to be a hotly contested race. Janesville native and U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan's approval rating was at 45% in the poll. Opinions on transportation funding were also looked at, with the poll finding 44% of respondents supported using money designated for other programs to pay for roads, 35% said taxes or fees should be increased, and only 3% favored additional borrowing as a solution. The poll also found a majority of respondents prefer to keep the Affordable Care Act in place, but would like for it to be improved. Of the respondents, 6% wanted to keep it as is, 54% would keep and improve it, 28% backed repealing it and replacing it, and 8% said they just want it repealed. The poll surveyed 800 registered voters between March 13th and March 16th and had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4%.

## **Structural Deficit Exceeds \$1 Billion Under Governor's Budget**

The nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau released a memo showing the state's structural deficit would be more than \$1 billion to start the 2019-21 biennium under the governor's proposed budget for the next two years. Although much greater than the \$211 million deficit under the governor's proposal for the current 2015-17 biennium, \$1 billion would still be the third best starting point over the last two decades. Governor Walker's Administration projected a deficit of \$735 million when he introduced his budget early last month. The structural deficit is determined by matching spending commitments against current revenues, and does not take into account revenue growth over the two-year budget period. The largest structural deficit in recent history came in the 2003-05 budget at \$2.9 billion.

## **Feingold Launches New Advocacy Group**

Former Democratic Sen. Russ Feingold announced the creation of a new nonprofit political advocacy group he says will be focused on abolishing the Electoral College, protecting voters' rights, reforming campaign finance, and protecting the independence of the Supreme Court. A press release announcing the creation of the group, called LegitAction, says it will "advocate for the restoration and protection of a legitimate U.S. government that is accountable to its citizens by promoting pro-democracy reforms." Feingold served three terms in the U.S. Senate before being defeated by Senator Ron Johnson in 2010. Feingold then lost a rematch against Johnson in November, a contest many expected him to win. During his time out of office, Feingold served as a Special Representative for the African Great Lakes region and the Democratic Republic of the Congo under the Obama Administration, while also teaching courses at Stanford University. LegitAction is not the first group Feingold has created, he previously led a political action committee called Progressives United that he ended in 2015 before his U.S. Senate run.

## **Memo Released on Self-Insurance Savings**

The nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau has released a memo detailing the savings Governor Walker has built-in to his biennial budget proposal from a proposed switch to a self-insured model for state employees. The memo looks at the impact to per pupil aid for public schools and UW System compensation funding, which stand to benefit from the savings the proposal would generate, estimated by Governor Walker to be \$60 million over the biennium. The memo also points out that if the Joint Finance Committee decides to delay implementation of the self-insurance contracts, which they have the ability to do under legislation passed last session, K-12 and UW System funding would be reduced in the first year of the biennium while a decision on the contracts is on hold. A number of top GOP lawmakers have indicated they plan to reject, or significantly modify, the self-insurance plan put forth by the GIB, while questioning the savings built into the governor's budget.

## **Ethics Complaint Filed Against Wisconsin Progress, Assembly Democratic Campaign Committee**

The elections watchdog group Wisconsin Democracy Campaign has filed a complaint against a liberal third party group and a Democratic campaign committee alleging they exceeded donation limits. The complaint stems from a recent WI Democracy Campaign analysis of corporate contributions to political groups, which found Wisconsin Progress Action gave over \$97,000 to the Assembly Democratic Campaign Committee. The legislature changed campaign finance laws in 2015, allowing for corporate contributions, up to a limit of \$12,000 to each party and committee. If the WI Democracy Campaign's findings hold-up, that would mean Wisconsin Progress contributed more than eight times the yearly limit to the ADCC over a three-month period last year. A spokesman for Wisconsin Progress declined comment, and a spokesman for the ADCC did not immediately respond to a request. A spokesman for the Ethics Commission confirmed a complaint had been received, but could not comment beyond that. 200 groups, including corporations, unions, tribes and other organizations, gave \$1.3 million in donations to legislative campaign committees in 2016, according to the WI Democracy Campaign analysis.

## State Unemployment Rate Drops

The state Department of Workforce Development released figures showing Wisconsin's unemployment rate in February stood at 3.7%, down 0.2% from January. Wisconsin added 7,600 private sector jobs in February, including 5,200 in the "leisure and hospitality" sector. The state also added 3,500 government jobs during the month. While the unemployment rate dropped, the labor participation rate increased to 68.3% – significantly above the national average of 60.3% for February. Walker and Republican lawmakers touted the numbers at a news conference and on social media. When asked about his 2010 campaign promise to create 250,000 jobs, a mark the state has yet to hit despite the encouraging unemployment numbers, Walker told reporters that when he made the pledge he did not anticipate the challenge of finding people with the skills to fill open jobs, arguing the openings are there, however employers are unable to fill them.