

The Journal Times

MAKE A CONNECTION

Tuesday, March 18, 2008

Opinion

Quit posturing and get to work

Tuesday, March 18, 2008 8:26 PM CDT

Wisconsin's budget is out of whack and needs some repair work. Unfortunately — and predictably — the repair workers, the Democrats and Republicans in the state Capitol, don't see eye to eye on how to get that done.

They've been pushing their own proposals on how to fix the budget deficit, which has been pegged at \$527 million over the next two years, all the while rushing to denounce the other side's package as a sham, a farce, or something even more despicable.

Please spare us the polemics and the posturing, there is work to be done and that work will entail — sigh — COMPROMISE.

Gov. Jim Doyle and legislators on both sides of the aisle know that, of course, so let's move ahead now, skip the public threats and move to negotiations. The only things that should be “off the table” are the rants of the ideologues that often fuel the fires in these debates, but provide little light in the long run.

Where to start?

We would suggest with Gov. Doyle's proposal for a hospital tax. Yes, that's the same one that the GOP Assembly deep-sixed in the last budget debate, but we would hope they are now swayed by the fact that the proposal has the backing of both the Wisconsin Hospital Association and the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, the state's largest business lobby.

The key to the proposal is that by increasing state spending on health care it would leverage \$420 million in federal funding to the state over the next two years. It would allow the state to increase what it pays hospitals for people in state health programs and at the same time free up \$125 million in state funds to defray the deficit.

That's a winning proposition and it would get the almost a quarter of the way to resolving the budget shortfall.

Where else can we close the gap?

Republicans want to slash state spending by \$250 million and drain the state's "rainy day" fund from \$122 million down to \$22 million. Assembly Speaker Mike Huebsch reasoned that in a budget with \$7 billion in spending, some cuts can be made. Doyle, for his part, has suggested \$87 million in spending delays or cuts.

Somewhere there should be some middle ground in those proposals.

Paring the rainy day fund down to \$22 million may be a little excessive, as is Doyle's plan to raid the state transportation fund of \$243 million. Nor do we care for the accounting gimmick proposed by Republicans that would "balance" the budget by pushing \$125 million in school aid payments back to July 2009 — right after the state's fiscal year ends. The pushes it off the calendar but does not deal with the deficit itself.

The Legislature and the governor can find resolution to the budget woes with a combination of trims, spending delays, fund raids and, yes, new taxes.

They should sit down, negotiate and get it done now. If Republicans and Democrats simply exchange public insults and refuse to budge for weeks or months as they have done in the past, they may well find themselves paying for that intransigence when the voting booths open in the fall.

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