



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® WISCONSIN

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To: Joint Committee on Finance

Re: 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 we offer the following guidance as you consider the proposed state budget in Assembly Bill 21/Senate Bill 21:

MAINTAIN STRONG CITIZEN INPUT AND GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT

Perhaps the most alarming part of the proposed budget is that it repeatedly recommends a weakening of the checks and balances which protect citizens from political swings in government. These recommendations 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. For example, the Wisconsin Judicial Commission was created in 1971 as an independent body to oversee judicial conduct with the authority to investigate judges and recommend discipline. It protects the people from the rare judge who abuses or misuses the authority that goes with the position. The proposed budget would place the commission under the control of the state Supreme Court, making it accountable to the very justices it needs, on occasion, to investigate.

There are several other examples of this kind of policy change in other parts of the proposed budget, including weakening of the citizen-based Natural Resources Board and encroachment on the authority of locally elected school boards who are accountable for education in their districts.

SUPPORT AN EDUCATED PUBLIC

The proposed budget seriously diverts tax dollars from our public schools to private schools. Further, even under the bills that have been introduced in the Assembly and House this year, private schools will still not be required to meet the same requirements as public schools, including:

- accounting for the use of public funds;
- comparable performance standards for their students;
- the same state standards for all school employees.

In addition, the proposed budget recommends funding cuts to some of the important programs and services that are the lifeblood of a public education system intended to serve all children. In particular, we are concerned about the following wide-ranging proposals in the budget for **pre-kindergarten to grade 12** public education in Wisconsin:

- *Elimination of limitations in statewide choice program
- *Changes in eligibility for private school vouchers
- *Creation of Charter School Oversight Board to oversee schools
- *Other changes in charter school creation and operations
- *Changes in statewide Common Core program of standards, assessment and accountability
- *Accountability standards for schools would change to letter grades
- *Teacher licenses available without teacher education certification
- *Other funding changes that stress public education

The proposed budget also contains wide-ranging policy proposals relating to our **University of Wisconsin System**, which threaten to lower its stature as a top-notch institution and make it inaccessible as a step toward prosperity for many of our families. Our concerns include:

- a. There is inadequate information on the specifics and ramifications of a change to an Independent Authority. Such a drastic change should not be undertaken without much more careful study with input from many directions. Funding implications would be of critical importance but so would many other important issues that have been key in the role of public higher education in Wisconsin. This includes our concern about possible language changes in the historical definition mission of the University of Wisconsin.
- b. The catastrophic immediate and long-term effects of the enormous funding decrease for the UW System and the impact on providing high quality education for Wisconsin students.
- c. The effect of a mandated freeze in tuition along with the projected huge funding decreases.

The League of Women Voters has worked for 95 years to promote informed and active participation in government. We believe that an education does not stop at the end of one's formal schooling. Therefore, we also oppose the 34 percent cut recommended for **Wisconsin Public Radio and Wisconsin Public Television**. These are invaluable services that keep people informed and up-to-date with in-depth reporting and educational programming.

SUPPORT A HEALTHY POPULATION

Senior Care is Wisconsin's prescription drug program for low-income people. The proposed budget recommends that Senior Care enrollees first sign up for Medicare Part D and then use the state benefits under Senior Care as a supplement. Part D is a more expensive program offered by insurance companies and other private companies approved by Medicare. Right now, under Senior Care, the state can negotiate with pharmaceutical companies for cheaper drugs than recipients can get through Medicare Part D. Senior Care has had bipartisan support. It is easier to enroll in and more understandable than Part D. There are lower co-pays and fewer coverage gaps than most Part D plans have. We urge you not to make Medicare Part D a prerequisite for Senior Care.

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 budget moves 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 would also eliminate Aging & Disability Resource Center governing boards and advisory councils. We are concerned about the impact of these changes upon frail, elderly persons.

We can't help but note that **BadgerCare** is a successful program which already provides for essential health care services for low income residents of Wisconsin. It can be expanded largely with federal dollars to include thousands more individuals and families who are currently waiting for access to quality and affordable health care. Expanding the BadgerCare program would be good for Wisconsin's economy, and the League has repeatedly urged Governor Walker to accept the federal money available to expand Medicaid, and that would improve the prospects for this biennial budget.

SUPPORT A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

Natural Resources Board. We oppose the proposal to reduce our state's 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. This power grab would defeat the checks and balances provided by the seven-member NRB, which is made up of citizens from a diverse geographic and professional cross section of our state. The NRB has for decades been accessible to the public and fully transparent as it creates rules for the Department of Natural Resources. It is alarming that the proposed budget would do away with this important tool for citizen input and transparency.

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 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 proposed budget freezes funding for the **Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program**, which was created in 1989 to safeguard natural land and waters for outdoor recreation and sports. This fund protects many hunting, boating and even urban park areas, which provides quality of life and supports our tourism industry. The League opposes this funding freeze.

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 more than \$6 million in cuts to polluted runoff management efforts, which are proven to have a direct and substantial impact on water quality. The funding will take away state support for urban and agricultural best practices, education, and technical assistance that provide water quality benefits.

SUPPORT PUBLIC TRANSIT

Public transit is a small part of the transportation budget, but it makes a huge difference for people who rely on public transit 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.

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. Do not use this budget to dismantle or weaken the watchdog agencies and citizen boards that hold government accountable to us, the citizens of our state.

We urge you 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.

Thank you.