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Citizens See Flaws, Disparity in Gov's Budget

By: Joel Rogers, Guest Editorial

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A funny thing happened on the way to legislative non-debate of Wisconsin's next biennial budget. Some Wisconsinites actually learned some of what Gov. Scott McCallum had proposed, and got mad as hell.

Before retiring later this week to the executive sessions where most of its work will get done, the Joint Finance Committee sponsored a series of public hearings on the McCallum budget proposal. (The next and last one is in Milwaukee.) And literally thousands of ordinary citizens, not just the usual lobbyist suspects, denounced it.

Their ranks ranged from parents of school-age kids, to "hook and bullet" conservationists not wanting to pave over the entire state, to more than a few local government officials wondering where on earth they will find local money for programs no longer supported by the state.

In all likelihood, they won't, which would mean real cutbacks in services across the state, from cities to small towns. Milwaukee County services would surely deteriorate further under the proposal, but so would education in the South Shore School District up in Ashland, where fully a quarter of the teachers would be cut.

Indeed, across the state, there's something to hate in the McCallum budget for almost anyone concerned about education, the environment, stable communities or public health and safety, not to mention equal opportunity and what is sometimes called "fairness" - the paired thoughts that the rich who've benefited most materially from this society should help keep it together, and that none of us should abandon the poor.

McCallum's budget, which is a giant Christmas tree of business goodies offered in the name of needed public austerity, by contrast proposes to:

Drop corporate taxes (especially for larger businesses operating beyond Wisconsin's borders).

Further deregulate polluters.

Limit educational opportunity.

Slash "human" services to working families.

All this, and he also takes pains to make sure that banks get paid before workers do when a business goes belly-up.

And where does it propose that public money instead be spent? On more prisons, of course! And more roads to connect the strip malls and other low-end commercial development relentlessly replacing our wilderness and family farms.

This budget registers a strange set of priorities - by all accounts at odds with what Wisconsinites would like for their state in the future. It also will continue to fuel a sprawl and lock-'em-up regime of economic development that is transforming the social no less than the physical landscape of our state.

But even on its own terms of "fiscal responsibility," the budget is often self-defeating. This is true in its tax provisions, which will further decrease state revenues. It's also true in the approach to big-ticket items of state spending.

Consider, as just one example, criminal justice. On the one hand, the state continues its love affair with prisons. Among other things, McCallum proposes three new facilities (including the faintly fishy acquisition of a private prison in Stanley originally built without any public promise of such state bailout), an annual department budget in excess of \$1 billion and almost 1,500 new staff positions over the next two years.

Then, to "save" money, it proposes slashing the budget of the state Public Defender's Office. But this move will only force counties, which are federally mandated to provide legal assistance to the indigent accused, to buy the much more expensive time of private attorneys. So, more money on a ballooning prison population - the size of which best registers not the success of a criminal justice system, but its failure - and more money, inefficiently spent, for lawyers for those to be locked up. Talk about dumb and dumber.

None of this tops McCallum's most famous proposal, from which he's since backed off without offering an alternative: to hold a discount sale on the state's inheritance from the national tobacco settlement, and then to use that money for things other than public health, beginning with some mop-up of previous state fiscal mismanagement.

McCallum's recent distancing from this and other bright ideas has led Joint Finance Committee Co-Chairman Brian Burke, D-Milwaukee, to declare the governor's proposed budget a political "orphan." That plus the extent of public outrage is sure to lead to at least some revisions in coming weeks. Let us hope so.

But the McCallum budget is not just flawed in its spending priorities, or how it goes about achieving his announced goal of fiscal austerity. It also, and more fundamentally, reflects a certain popular view of governing, and with it a certain view of our present options. According to the broad approach, politics essentially is reduced to choices about "more" or "less" government taxing and spending. McCallum's view is that we should have "less," leaving those who disagree with him supposedly wanting "more." And as applied to the present circumstance, McCallum argues, we must have "less," even if we want "more," because we just can't afford more.

These two claims - we should have "less," and we can't afford "more" anyway - are the essentials of the present governor's philosophy. But as we'll see next week, they're both wrong, and dangerous.

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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