



## **WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE**

**EYE ON THE CAPITOL**  
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### **GOVERNORS HOLD ENORMOUS ADVANTAGE IN BUDGET DEBATES**

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

It is spring of an odd-numbered year. That means the debate over the state budget is holding center stage in the State Capitol and will do so until mid-summer. In that debate Governor Doyle, like all Governors before him, holds a strong “home court advantage.”

The budget is the Governor’s responsibility in his capacity as head of the executive branch of state government. The Governor defines the terms of the debate by his budget choices and the priorities he chooses. This applies both to decisions as to which programs to fund and how to raise the revenues needed to fund them.

The Governor, like any executive, also enjoys the “bully pulpit.” From his perch in the state’s most visible political office he can command front-page news for his speeches. His staff and cabinet secretaries can hit the road to sell the budget decisions to civic groups and newsrooms across Wisconsin.

The legislature can only react. And it is nearly impossible for all 132 legislators or even only those in the other party to agree on a single alternative budget.

The Governor is also able to force the legislature to play the Grinch to his Santa Claus. This is especially the case when it comes to paying for the services government provides.

As noted in this column before, most of the decisions around taxing and spending touch five major policy areas: elementary and secondary schools, medical assistance, higher education, prisons, and aids to local government that serve to offset property taxes. Cutting these programs is never popular. Finding the money to pay for them – without raising taxes—is a challenge every Governor tries to meet.

Governor Doyle, like other Governors has turned to “sin taxes” and fees to balance his budget. He is proposing a higher tax on cigarettes, a tax on hospitals, higher fees for auto registration, and other such assessments to generate about \$1.7 billion in revenues.

Each of these ideas has its critics, but each of them avoids painful budget cuts. Those who don't like the cigarette tax or the tax on hospitals must find a way to pay for medical assistance for the poor, for children in needy families, and for others who lack health insurance.

Those who don't like the other fee increases must decide either to tap other revenue sources such as raising tuition for UW students, or to cut existing services, closing campuses, or reducing school aids; a move that often leads to higher property taxes. Opposing the Governor's modification of "truth in sentencing" means finding the money to keep more offenders in prison.

None of these alternatives is especially palatable. So, the option of going along with the Governor's recommendations and letting him take the heat for his choices becomes more attractive as the budget season wears on.

Legislators also know that even when they win they may still lose. They know that the Governor, armed with the nation's most potent veto power, will modify or undo many of their successful efforts to change the budget.

So while a number of the Governor's ideas will be rejected or modified, at the end of the day the legislature's budget will give him the lion's share of what he requested. The budget process will end, as it began, with the Governor holding the upper hand.

And that is one reason why a good number of legislators would love to be Governor some day.

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