



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

April 27, 2007

DOES POLICY BELONG IN THE BUDGET? IT DEPENDS ON WHETHER YOU LIKE THE POLICY

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Most of us think of budgets as documents that identify our income and expenditures. Budgets identify the amount of money, or revenue, available for use to meet our expenses. Ideally we run a surplus so we have more to spend next year or money to save when needed.

When it comes to state government, budgets aren't that simple. State budgets are about more than dollars and cents, revenues and expenditures. Over the past several decades, state budgets have included policy proposals that don't always require the expenditure of funds. The reasons are, as one might guess, political as much as they are fiscal.

The budget is the one bill that must pass. Over time, Governors and legislators alike have realized that adding non-fiscal policy items to a budget means: 1) the policy won't be sidetracked or killed by parliamentary moves late in a session, and 2) the Governor can sidestep messy debates and compromises that are part of the normal legislative process.

Some policies proposed in a state budget deal with government structure, like merging the UW and State University systems, or converting agencies like the DNR and the Transportation Department from one governed by a part time Board to one led by a Secretary appointed by the Governor. Others involve new programs, like the state ethics code, or the parental choice program.

Reaction by interest groups and editorials will vary. When a policy is to their liking, they praise the Governor for his leadership. When it isn't, they argue the policy warrants more scrutiny as separate legislation.

When the same party controls the Governorship and the Legislature, lawmakers are more likely to go along with policy proposals the Governor places in the budget. When the party in power in one or both houses of the legislature differs from that of the Governor, less policy survives the budget process.

In recent years, one of the early decisions made by the Finance Committee in each budget process is that of removing some of the "policy items" in the budget. The Committee did just that last week. Dozens of items were taken out of the bill and left to rise or fall on their own merits as separate legislation. These include proposals to:

- Modify the "truth in sentencing" law

- Rename and change the authority of the Parole Commission
- Modify the campaign finance appropriation
- Allow staff and faculty of the UW system to engage in collective bargaining
- Enact a statewide cap on licensed nursing home beds
- Extend “domestic partner benefits” to state employees
- Modify high school graduation requirements

Some of these proposals may yet become law in separate legislation. Some may return to the budget as part of the inevitable “horse trading” that takes place near the end of budget debates. Some may return in a future budget.

By inserting policy items in the budget, the Governor took advantage of his role in the process to define the terms of the budget debate. By taking some of those items out of the budget, the Legislature asserted its authority to define what policies are sufficiently related to the activities of taxing and spending to be part of the budget. To put it another way, “the Governor proposed and the legislature disposed.”

And the give and take of politics goes on. Just as the founders intended.