

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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EVEN IN THE “OFF SEASON” POLICY MAKING GOES ON

By John Huebscher

If there is an off-season in state government, summer of an even-numbered year qualifies. The campaign season is beginning and, to the extent they can, politicians will avoid controversial decisions until after the election.

But that doesn't mean all policy work stops. In both the legislative and executive branches, our leaders are setting the stage for the debates of 2011.

The legislative branch has formed a series of special committees under the auspices of the Legislative Council, the non-partisan research arm of the Legislature. During the regular legislative session, Council staff supports the work of the legislative committees. In the session interim, the legislators who sit on the Council and direct its work authorize a number of “study committees” to examine in depth selected issues.

These study committees consist of legislators from both parties and several “public members”, private citizens with special expertise in the area of inquiry. The panels meet regularly between now and early 2011 to hear testimony and investigate their topics. When finished, the committees submit reports to the Legislative Council. The Council in turn decides whether to introduce a study committee's recommendations as legislation.

This year, the Council is authorizing 16 such study committees. Among the topics they will take up are:

- Access to health care, with a focus on the shortage of providers in rural areas and inner cities
- Implementation of the federal health care reform legislation;
- Causes of infant mortality and an evaluation of efforts to address it;
- Funding of the criminal justice system;
- A study of rules and policies related to fraud prevention, detection, investigation, and prosecution in public assistance programs.

For its part, the executive branch will also be busy in the coming months. The summer of an election year marks the first step in the budget process as the Governor issues budget instructions to state agencies.

The instructions set forth fiscal assumptions, limits on what may be requested by an agency, and policy priorities that govern agency budget requests. This year's instructions include the following:

- Agencies are to assume there will be zero growth in general purpose revenue appropriations in the 2011-13 biennium.
- Programs excepted from this directive include K-12 school aids, corrections and health institutions, Medical Assistance, the Division of Child Safety and Permanence, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and UW System instruction and research activities that are focused on economic growth.
- The zero growth assumption also applies to programs paid for with segregated transportation funds, the conservation fund, and the lottery fund.
- Agencies should also prepare plans to absorb a 10 percent permanent base cut of many non-federally-funded appropriations (except for debt service, fuel, and utilities).

Because this is a year when Wisconsin elects a governor, we don't know who will act on the budget requests submitted later in the fall. But the process is such that much of the basic work in the budget can be done in advance of the election. These agency requests provide the new Governor, whoever he is, with a "rough draft" that reflects the state agencies' perspective as to how much money will be needed to operate their programs.

This "off season" work may not generate as many headlines as the election campaigns, or the Brewers and the Packers, but it is important. Decisions made by these study committees and agency budget-makers will have a telling influence on what happens next year in the Capitol.

And this is one more reason why "faithful citizens" should be engaged in the issues between elections.

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