



State Senator

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11th Senate District

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## Wisconsin is Back on Track

This week, Governor Walker delivered his State of the State address. This is an annual event when all members of the Senate, Assembly, Supreme Court, and Constitutional officers gather together to hear the Governor report on the condition of Wisconsin. The State of the State speech is both a reflection of the past year and a plan for the year ahead. As I have discussed in previous articles, many accomplishments have been made, and Wisconsin is a ship turning its course.

Coming into 2011, we were faced with a challenge of reining in a multi-billion dollar deficit left behind by the previous administration and Legislature. Wisconsin was drowning in debt, unemployment flirted with double-digit numbers, and taxes and government spending were both too high. Something drastic needed to be done in order to correct our course and get back on the road to economic recovery.

After a very long and tumultuous 2011, I believe in 2012, we are headed in the right direction. The state budget was balanced without raising taxes or using one-time money or dramatically increasing our debt. The unemployment rate, now at 7.1%, is the lowest it has been in the last three years, as companies are expanding and hiring, and adding more jobs across the state. Local school districts now have the ability and flexibility to manage their budgets, maintain classes, and offer faculty and staff additional merit and performance pay.

Throughout Wisconsin, taxpayers are finally getting the relief they have been calling for now that a permanent property tax freeze has been enacted into law. Overall, property taxes have declined statewide by \$47 million for K-12 schools, equaling a 1% decrease on the school tax portion of the average property tax bill. It is the first time since 1996 that many property taxpayers have seen their bill go down.

Even the highly respected Moody's Investors Service has positive things to say about Wisconsin's financial condition, reporting that the state budget closed a \$3.4 billion budget gap, while at the same time, improved the state's ability to meet obligations as they come due. An interesting Wall Street Journal article compared and contrasted Illinois to Wisconsin, noting the ever-deteriorating financial condition of Illinois in contrast to the upward financial path that Wisconsin is on.

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Education remains a priority for Wisconsin. Lawmakers understand the importance of a quality education for our children, as more than forty percent of the general purpose revenue budget goes towards our schools. Having a good education also involves every student learning to read by the end of third grade, which is the goal of the Governor's 'Read to Lead' initiative. Other proposed education improvements touted by the Governor include educator effectiveness and school accountability.

The Governor also noted the efforts underway to improve Wisconsin's ability to grow and create jobs. Regulatory reform initiatives may soon hit the Senate floor with the intent of streamlining the process for a number of permits which companies must obtain in order to do business in Wisconsin. Employers want to do the right thing both for the economy and the environment, but at times, lengthy delays in the permit process can be very costly and impede job growth. The reform measures will make Wisconsin government more effective and responsive to the needs of businesses, while at the same time, maintain the state's high environmental standards.

We are also helping our veterans gain employment. Recently, the Senate passed Senate Bill 338, which waives fees for certain professional and occupational licenses issued to veterans. This bill will help men and women who served their country gain skillful employment. In addition, the Governor has directed the Department of Veterans Affairs to make full employment of Wisconsin veterans a priority, a goal we all share.

We are also looking for ways to connect those who are searching for work to open jobs. There are many skilled jobs available in Wisconsin, but unfortunately, there may not be enough skilled workers to fill those positions. As a solution to this problem, the Governor recently introduced a 'Wisconsin Working' plan in order to improve worker training and connect out-of-work individuals to open and good-paying jobs.

The Governor's State of the State address gave us much to consider, and I look forward to discussing these ideas with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle as we begin to finish out the legislative session. Wisconsin is back on track and I am proud of all the work done which put us in this position. We still have much to do, but I am confident the work of Legislature will remain focused on putting people back to work.

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