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STATE SENATOR

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Looking Back on 2017

By
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As the year draws to a close, I often look back on my time in the Legislature and think of decisions that have an effect on our families and our neighborhoods.

This year, big companies are unwrapping gifts. The luckiest of really big companies is Foxconn. The \$3 billion deal to bring the flat-screen TV and computer monitor manufacturer to Racine County is overwhelmingly unpopular in western Wisconsin. I've received over one-hundred calls and letters from folks who asked about the lack of taxpayer and environmental protections. They wonder where the money will come from in an already tight budget.

2017 was the year of a late budget that failed to address many problems lawmakers promised to fix: roads, schools and local government relief. I wrote an alternative budget showing a path to fixing many of these problems.

One new tax was passed to help roads - hybrids and electric car owners will pay more. But the money collected won't cover a fraction of the long term needs of fixing our roads and bridges.

No changes were made to the way local governments are funded. Flat state spending for local communities means more struggles to provide local services like police, fire and social services.

To address the criticism the Legislature was not fixing the problems with funding our public schools, a new task force called the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding was created and just recently started its work. I'm cautiously optimistic changes will come to provide fairness in school funding. Meanwhile, many families are paying higher property taxes because of school referenda passed last year to keep schools afloat.

Two other bills stand out in 2017 as topics that brought a great deal of contact from constituents: sulfide mining and high capacity wells. Overwhelmingly, people opposed getting rid of our twenty-year-old "Prove it First" law. The old law required a company to first prove metal mining was safe before it was permitted to mine. A few weeks ago,

Governor Walker signed into effect a new law. It will allow mining for silver, gold, copper and other minerals without proving it can be done without polluting the environment.

People were opposed to getting rid of DNR oversight of high capacity wells. The new law created permits for these wells to be “in perpetuity,” or forever.

Western Wisconsin is home to more mines than any other part of the state. A big part of sand mining is access to a high capacity well permit. Here, folks know, up close and personal, what happens when a sand mine moves in next door.

A horse named Apples helped tell the story about what happens when mines open shop and neighbors are not protected. Poor Apples died, likely of toxic metals in the water. Later the family found almost ten times the limit of arsenic in their water. The family lives a little over a half mile from a sand mine. The courts will decide what killed Apples, but the family pointed out, when an oil industry down-turn caused production to stop at a nearby mine, the water cleared up.

The state failed to protect folks and their critters in Apples’ neighborhood.

Drinking clean water and enjoying our beautiful outdoors are joys we all share. Which is why protecting the environment has been a long-standing bipartisan effort. It was a bipartisan legislature, including our current Governor when he was a State Assembly Representative, that created the Prove it First mining law.

As we close 2017, I’m grateful for a bipartisan group of lawmakers working together to legalize hemp as a commodity. This is a bill I’ve introduced for several years. I recently spoke with former Senator Sheila Harsdorf. She shared that many farmers around Wisconsin have contacted her to say they want to grow hemp.

I’m grateful for the work of the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to write rules so farmers can get hemp seeds in the ground next spring. The Senate lost a strong voice for agriculture in Senator Harsdorf resignation, but we’ve gained a big voice for agriculture in her appointment as the new DATCP Secretary.

Wishing all of you a Happy and Prosperous New Year!