



KATHLEEN VINEHOUT **STATE SENATOR**

Looking Forward, Looking Back

By
Senator Kathleen Vinehout

In the early morning, I take the opportunity to answer letters. People have written about cuts to schools, tourism, agriculture, services for the disabled and hospitals – all within the past Christmas week. I find myself explaining the effects of the recession on state government and resulting budget cuts.

Looking back, the state budget dominated legislative work in 2009. Wisconsin, along with most other states, faced an unprecedented deficit. After the budget was written by the Governor, tax revenues fell more significantly than anyone imagined. In just one month - April of 2009 - income tax revenues were 35% lower than April of 2008.

The Governor did not want to raise overall taxes and rejected most proposals to raise income or sales taxes. He did propose raising income taxes by 1% on those making over \$250,000 a year. The Governor and the legislature also worked hard to close tax loop holes used by very large corporations to shelter income from Wisconsin in other states. But, despite the campaign rhetoric you hear to the contrary, deep cuts were made to balance the budget.

Sometimes impossible decisions must now be made and pain is felt by those the state used to fund but can no longer afford.

Partly because of the difficult decisions made in the budget, this year over five thousand, two hundred people from all over our Senate District contacted me. Almost half of all those people had concerns related to the state budget.

For example, nearly five hundred farmers wrote, asking to remove a new slaughter fee that fell disproportionately on the chicken plant in Arcadia. Through the hard work Representative Danou and I, we were able to remove the fee from the budget.

About half of those who contacted us did through email. Over a thousand people phoned for assistance or called to offer an opinion. Over 1,300 people mailed post cards, form letters or sent a hand written or personally typed letter. Almost four hundred people came to the Capitol and sat down to visit.

School funding and resulting problems with property taxes led 50 citizens from Pepin to ride a school bus to Madison. We spent much of the day together at a hearing on school funding reform and in discussions about how to solve this difficult problem. Work continues into 2010 as we grapple with less state money and rising school costs.

Needing help finding affordable health insurance was the most likely reason people called for assistance. The struggles related to health insurance were made worse when people lost their jobs, had hours cut back or saw dairy prices plummet. Many also called for help with unemployment insurance or workers compensation.

We faced the challenging problem of more people needing services at a time when state resources were scarce. Many proposed cuts disproportionately hurt rural areas.

I and a colleague organized a Caucus of rural legislators and made many important changes in a difficult budget including money for rural schools, local government and nursing homes; restoring the Clean Sweep program; eliminating an oil tax that would have hurt farm cooperatives; eliminating proposed changes to liability laws that would have hurt about every business and keeping open the local offices of Natural Resources, Motor Vehicles and the State Patrol.

But playing offense instead of defense was hard in a tight budget year. I did propose and pass needed changes to reform health insurance helping more find affordable coverage.

We also made changes in drunk driving laws and campaign finance reform. New laws makes it easier to recycle oil, computers and other electronic waste and protects our fish and water by restricting the use of mercury. Spring 2010 will see more environmental work as climate change legislation is debated.

My staff and I assisted over fifty communities including townships obtaining help for local projects. Through phone calls, letters of support, information and assistance with grants, we helped local communities apply for over forty eight million dollars of projects and –to date- saw over eleven million funded. Work continues and throughout the coming year residents will see improvements made in communities across our Senate District.

A big thank you goes to our senate staff; Kathie Colbert, Linda Kleinschmidt, Benjamin Larson and Joel Nilsestuen who made sure the phones and emails were answered. And ‘thank you’ to all who contacted us and gave us the opportunity to serve you, the people.