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**Several state agencies seek new funds for 2021-23 budget**

*By WisPolitics.com*

State agencies want to update the unemployment insurance computer system, create a new position to train law enforcement on the use of force, and double how much utilities pay into an energy efficiency program, according to recent budget requests.

All told, agencies have already requested a net increase of $755 million in general purpose revenue for the 2021-23 budget even before adding key pieces such as state aid for K-12 education, the court system and the Legislature, according to a WisPolitics.com review of the requests.

The agency requests are part of the building blocks Gov. Tony Evers and his staff will use in building the two-year budget he’ll propose to the Legislature early next year. In June, the governor sent a letter to agency heads asking most of them not to seek “any additional GPR-funded expenditures in either year of the upcoming biennium,” citing the economic uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In many cases, the agencies said the GPR increases they want only covered costs to continue and weren’t for new expenses. That includes the $122.8 million in Corrections’ ask.

But several agencies are seeking new funds despite Evers’ letter:

* District attorneys are seeking an increase of $28.4 million, nearly 28 percent above their base, to help fund an additional 57 positions, boost salary, cover merit-based pay progression, and take care of fringe benefits.
* The Department of Military Affairs wants an additional $33.8 million, including money to design and implement a new statewide interoperable radio network.
* The Public Defender Board is asking for $14.8 million, including money for 40 new positions.

Joint Finance Co-chair Albert Darling, R-River Hills, said Evers “needs to get serious with his agencies.”

“Asking for increases after many Wisconsinites lost their jobs or wages due to the pandemic shows they are out of touch,” Darling added. “Every family in the state had to make tough choices. They can afford a tax hike and shouldn’t be asked for one.”

Some of the agencies seeking the biggest increases on a percentage basis aren’t under Evers’ direct control. DOJ’s request amounts to a 25.2 percent boost in GPR over base, while district attorneys want a 27.8 percent hike.

Of those agencies directly under Evers, Tourism is seeking a 26.8 percent increase to plow into tourism development and promotion, while Military Affairs is seeking the largest increase of any agency at 54 percent.

The net request for additional GPR was held down by two significant moves.

The Department of Administration listed a proposed $253.3 million in savings by adjusting bond authority required for pension obligation bonds debt service. It is essentially an accounting move that more accurately reflects costs.

Meanwhile, the Office of Commissioner for Insurance is projecting a savings of $28.5 million with the feds picking up more of the costs for the Wisconsin Healthcare Stability Plan. The program, created under then-Gov. Scott Walker, helps keep down cost increases in the individual health insurance market under the Affordable Care Act. Itis jointly funded by the state and federal governments.

The requests lay out agency demands as the governor begins to build the 2021-23 budget. Still, the financial foundation for the 2021-23 budget won’t be known until mid-November, when DOA releases a summary of the budget requests and its projections for state revenues through mid-2023.

Some of the agency proposals:

* The Department of Health Services is again proposing to accept federal money to expand the Medicaid program. In its proposal, the agency warns the cost to continue the current Medicaid program would require an additional $1.1 billion in GPR over the next biennium largely due to an expected increase in enrollment. But accepting the federal money to expand the program would save $558.3 million, and the proposal reflects that cost estimate. Secretary Angela Palm wrote in her cover letter the savings would be higher than past estimates because it’s expected more people would enroll. She also warned the state could need additional support from the Legislature to address COVID-19 without more help from the federal government. That includes a testing budget of more than $1 billion with an additional $225million for ongoing contact tracing.
* The Public Service Commission is proposing a change that would require utilities to pay an additional $100 million annually to Focus on Energy. The program funds energy efficiency and renewable energy projects through a requirement that investor-owned utilities put 1.2 percent of operating revenues toward the effort. The proposal would double that to 2.4 percent of operating revenues. The PSC says a study found such an increase would increase energy savings by approximately 50 percent.
* The Department of Workforce Development wants to boost vocational rehabilitation services by $929,300 in GPR, a move then-Secretary Caleb Frostman wrote in his letter was exempt from Evers’ budget directive. The agency, which has been plagued by problems processing unemployment claims during the pandemic, also wants money to modernize the computer system and to repeal drug testing that is part of the program. It’s also seeking to increase the maximum weekly unemployment benefit to $409 from the current $370 on Jan. 1, 2022, before going to a formula that would be 50 percent of average weekly wages a year later before climbing to 75 percent on Jan. 1, 2024.
* The Department of Justice’s requested position to train law enforcement on use of force would research, develop and implement implicit bias, procedural justice, racial intelligence and other training to enhance current law enforcement academy curriculum. The material also would be used in continuing education for law enforcement. Democratic Attorney General Josh Kaul also wants to fund a new position focused on supporting the mental health of first responders.

*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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