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**State budget drama presents dilemmas for major players**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Every budget starts with a little drama. When will they finish it? Will they even get it done?

But as the Joint Finance Committee prepares to dive into the details of Gov. Tony Evers’ 2021-23 budget, there’s an extra layer of intrigue — thanks to the dysfunction that has gripped the Capitol during what seems like a perpetual standoff between Evers and GOP legislative leaders.

The billions of federal dollars flowing into Wisconsin as part of President Biden’s stimulus package — and Republicans’ inability to influence how most of it is spent — only deepen the intrigue.

So, each of the players in this drama has a dilemma.

For Evers, insiders say, it boils down to signing the budget Republicans send him or vetoing the whole thing.

The governor has one of the most powerful veto pens in the country and can rewrite large swaths of spending bills with his line-item veto power. That means he can better line up the budget with his 2022 re-election priorities after lawmakers are through with it.

Evers took advantage of that power two years ago to increase spending on K-12 education beyond what the Legislature had approved. Later, he’d see the state Supreme Court overturn three of his partial vetoes as he reworked legislative proposals. But the coalitions in those decisions were so fractured that some budget watchers doubt they’re going to dissuade Evers from getting creative again.

Still, there’s only so much Evers can do. He can’t put back in his proposal to expand Medicaid after Republicans inevitably pull it out of the two-year spending plan. And he can’t restore his call to legalize recreational marijuana after it suffers the same fate.

That leaves the question of whether he can do enough to make the document palatable. Because the alternative, insiders say, likely isn’t.

Many believe if Evers vetoes the entire document, then the GOP-controlled Legislature likely would simply walk away from budget deliberations; GOP leaders would tell the governor since he’s so intent to spend all of the $3.2 billion in federal COVID aid on his own, he can figure out a way to use that money to keep state government rolling for the next two years.

Some conservatives are still smarting over the 2019-21 budget, believing they gave Evers too much Spending.

Insiders theorize about a scenario with no budget in which the projected revenue growth over the next two years keeps building up in the state’s general fund as spending for many agencies remains at current levels. Then if Republicans win back the East Wing in 2022, one of the first bills the new governor would sign would send some sort of rebate to taxpayers, kicking off the session with a bang.

Knowing that, some believe Republicans will pack poison pills into the budget that would make it difficult for Evers to sign it or even goad him into vetoing it. But that game of chicken comes with its own risk, insiders say. Republicans are already beside themselves over the amount of federal money flowing into school districts like Milwaukee and Madison that largely haven’t been open to in-person instruction this school year due to the formula used to divide the money. Their districts, meanwhile, are getting nowhere near the federal resources even as they’ve racked up costs for PPE and sanitation. Trying to tell their districts to live on what they have while Milwaukee swims in a sea of federal dollars would be a tough sell.

Thus, one of the main dilemmas for Republicans: Can they put together a school funding budget that rewards their districts for providing in-person instruction without giving Evers fodder to use his veto pen to rework what they do into something more to his liking?

One of the obvious ways to reward schools that have been open would be to create a categorical aid expressly sending them money to cover their COVID costs. Or maybe they could vastly expand sparsity aid, which goes to small, rural districts. Still, can Republicans find a way to do it without risking Evers reworking the entire thing to undercut their intent?

Every additional word packed into the budget is one more Evers can use to tinker. Or maybe he’d outright veto whatever Republicans would devise. That would have its own downside, some budget watchers say, because Republicans would howl that the governor doesn’t care for rural schools. Then again, after the way the Democratic Party’s appeal took a nosedive during the Trump years, it’s not like Evers is going to pull a ton of votes out of rural Wisconsin next year anyway.

Like the challenge with rewarding districts for in-person instruction, there’s also a challenge for Republicans in how they account for all the federal money flowing into places like Milwaukee and Madison when deciding how to dole out state money to municipalities. Maybe Republicans shoot for a record increase in the road aid to towns to get money into rural areas.

The theme of rural Wisconsin getting left out is already percolating from GOP members of the Finance Committee and will likely shape their view of how to spend state money. But, again, insiders ask: How can that be done without opening the door to Evers’ veto pen?

Beyond that, insiders note, the big question facing Republicans is whether they can get on the same page, period.

Insiders regularly question whether the two GOP caucuses can reach a deal — speculation fed by some early signs of tension this session. Still, they always seem to find a way to land the plane. And many would be surprised if they couldn’t this time — even if some aren’t confident Republicans can get it done on time.

For Democratic lawmakers, the dilemma is whether all of them will vote no again.

Two years ago, every Democratic member of the Legislature voted against the budget their GOP counterparts produced only to see Evers sign the document after reworking it with his partial veto authority. And Republicans still taunt their Democratic colleagues over that.

It didn’t come back to bite any vulnerable Democratic lawmakers last fall in an election that seemed to be dominated by the top of the ticket and COVID-19. Maybe that’s a different story next fall in a more “normal” environment, election watchers say.

So, knowing the dilemma facing the governor, will Democrats like Reps. Steve Doyle of Onalaska, Beth Meyers of Bayfield, and Nick Milroy of South Range vote no just like they did in 2019? What about new Democratic Assembly members Deb Andraca of Whitefish Bay and Sara Rodriguez of Brookfield? Most Democrats in the state Legislature are in such safe seats — at least as currently drawn — that their budget votes aren’t going to hurt them. In fact, many wouldn’t vote for any budget produced by a GOP-controlled Legislature even if Evers were sending signals he could get on board with it.

But those vulnerable Democrats have to at least consider it. Same goes for Sens. Janet Bewley of Mason and Jeff Smith of Eau Claire, after Trump won both of their districts in November. Bewley also will face pressure on her vote as the head of the minority caucus in the Senate.

Others, though, point out vulnerables are going to face an onslaught of negatives ads anyway. They’ve learned to navigate tough votes before, and they’ll do it again.

The way things played out in 2019 prompted some grumbling among Democratic lawmakers about a lack of communication between the East Wing and their caucuses. And that prompted some blowback from the governor’s backers who said lawmakers knew the dynamic Evers faced, they just didn’t consider it when deciding how to vote.

If all Democratic lawmakers vote against the budget again only to see Evers sign it, some surmise, it won’t be a good sign of improved communications. But if you see some vulnerable Democrats vote for the budget, it may be a sign that the governor will sign it in the end — after some extensive revisions.

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