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**Eight-year UW tuition freeze may be ending**

*By WisPolitics.com*

The University of Wisconsin tuition freeze that’s been in place for the past eight years would expire under a Republican motion the Joint Finance Committee approved in late May.

Along with allowing the cap on in-state, undergrad tuition to go away, the motion would add $22.3 million in additional general taxpayer revenue for the UW System, the Wisconsin Technical College System and the Higher Educational Aids Board. The measures will need to get approval from both houses of the Legislature and the governor to become law.

It’s a fraction of what Gov. Tony Evers had proposed for the three institutions. He wanted to put $191.6 million into the UW System, including $50.4 million to fund his plan to extend the tuition freeze by another two years.

He also called for an additional $36 million for the Wisconsin Technical College System and $34.3 million for the Higher Educational Aid Board, which provides need-based grants to residents enrolled in UW schools, tech colleges and private colleges in the state.

Rep. Evan Goyke, D-Milwaukee, said he was surprised Republicans were willing to drop the tuition freeze after they have made it a centerpiece of their arguments about college affordability over the last eight years. He also said by failing to put an increase in budget money for UW operations, it was setting up the possibility of a significant tuition hike in the coming two years.

“We have the funds to do it, but not the political will,” Goyke said.

Sen. Dale Kooyenga, R-Brookfield, said the freeze made sense when it was first put in place in the 2013-15 budget because the UW System was seeking a 6 percent tuition increase even with $1 billion in reserve funds that it hadn’t properly disclosed to the public.

He said the university has dramatically increased transparency since then and there needs to be a “glide path” off the freeze. He also said there is a bill working its way through the Legislature that would put a cap on how large future increases could be while offering a warning to the system.

“Listen carefully, UW, you’re looking at the guardrails,” Kooyenga said, referring to the committee. “If UW decides to jack up tuition in a tone-deaf manner, this body will take action.”

Of the $22.3 million the committee proposed for the three areas, $5 million would go toward a freshwater collaboration that involves the 13 UW campuses as well as industry, local communities and others. The effort’s mission is to establish Wisconsin as a leader in water-related science.

Another $5 million would go to HEAB to help fund grants for students who enroll in nursing programs. The money would also help repay loans for faculty in nursing programs.

GOP lawmakers also want to put $2 million into ag agents at UW-Extension and $750,000 for foster youth programs.

In all four cases, the money would go into Joint Finance’s supplemental appropriation and the university would have to come back to the committee with plans to use the money before it would be released.

Sen. LaTonya Johnson, D-Milwaukee, noted GOP leaders earlier this spring had said the state was in a strong position to cut taxes. Yet her Republican counterparts aren’t using the state’s strong economic position to invest in constituencies such as college students.

“Where’s their piece of our strong financial position?” she said.

Kooyenga slammed Democratic complaints about the investment in the UW System, noting that Evers required the university to lapse $86 million as part of his administration’s moves to prepare for the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on state revenues. In January, the Legislative Fiscal Bureau projected the state would finish the current fiscal year on June 30 with a surplus of nearly $1.9 billion and another $1 billion in revenue growth. LFB is expected to soon do another projection that takes into account a tax cut signed into law in February that will reduce revenues by a projected $595 million through mid-2023.

“The rhetoric that you just heard about support for the university is the same, tired political rhetoric as far as where Republicans are on education and where Democrats are on education,” Kooyenga said.

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