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**Democrat minority leaders looking to make impact**

By WisPolitics.com

When you are deep in the legislative minority, your options are few to get attention and exert influence.

You can try to work with the majority members to include your proposals.

You can take your ideas to the press and hope to rally public opinion.

And you can cooperate closely with the chief executive if the governor happens to be of the same party.

The leaders of the minorities in the Assembly and Senate will have to use all the levers they can in the next couple of years with Republicans holding such wide majorities.

The first test will be the state budget, set to be introduced by Democratic Gov. Tony Evers in mid-February. Last time around, there was very little give and take amongst the parties in the Legislature. The Republicans stripped out many of the governor's big ideas and sent him back a budget with a big tax cut, almost daring him to veto the whole thing. Instead, he used his line-item veto power to tweak the document and signed the big tax cut. Republicans complained he was taking credit for their work.

Now, fresh off Evers' reelection and the failure of Republicans to gain a veto-proof majority in the Legislature, talk of compromise is in the air.

Whether that is real remains to be seen. But a projected $7 billion surplus could make compromise easier -- especially on sticky issues like state aid to municipalities, also known as shared revenue. Municipalities around the state have been asking voters to approve spending referendums to fund public safety and other ongoing expense items -- essentially asking voters to tax themselves to help out their local government budget.

Republicans are seemingly open to more shared revenue but say they want spending accountability and more tax cuts for individuals.

Democratic legislative leaders Rep. Greta Neubauer and Sen. Melissa Agard at a recent WisPolitics.com event argued there is enough of a budget surplus to fund at least a little of everything Republicans and Democrats want.

The Senate minority leader said the more than $7 billion projected surplus should be enough to fund middle-class tax relief, schools, mental health resources, other local government services and more.

“I do think that there is room for bipartisan agreement in getting that robust surplus back into the hands of our communities,” the Madison Democrat said. “And we don’t need to be choosy; $7 billion is a lot of money.”

Neubauer, the Assembly minority leader, also suggested there’s room in the budget to fully fund K-12 schools, a significant bump from the current two-thirds model, without raising property taxes.

The Racine native said if she had “a magic wand to do one thing in Wisconsin: I think that it’s fully funding K-12 schools.”

“Because if our schools are strong, it ripples out in every way,” she said. “It helps struggling rural and urban and suburban communities; it is just at the center of everything.”

She added the state has a responsibility to make education investments that won’t increase the tax burden.

“I think what Wisconsinites want, is they want great schools for their kids, and they also do not want their property taxes to have to go up to fund all of that,” she said.

Neubauer after the event when asked if she plans to introduce a bill to fully fund the schools said Democrats are “just in conversations with the administration and colleagues about what we think is doable here in the short term.”

“But that’s a long-term goal that I have, and I hope and believe that we can make progress towards it this session,” she added.

The two Democrat leaders also said they will continue the push to legalize medicinal marijuana, but Agard blasted GOP leaders for standing in the way.

“They are not listening to the people of the state of Wisconsin,” Agard said. “It is our jobs as elected legislators, as elected policymakers, to lift up the will of the people. The will of the people is the law of the land. It’s not the will of a handful of powerful Republican legislators to create the law of the land.”

She wondered aloud, “Is it because they planted a stake a decade ago and said ‘We’re not going to do this,’ and they don’t know how to recover, and move forward, and be bold, and say ‘I was wrong?'”

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, has in the past advocated for medical marijuana, arguing it could be an alternative to highly addictive opioids for those treating pain. Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, last session said he didn’t want to take up the proposal unless the FDA changed its guidance on the drug, which is classified as a Schedule I controlled substance. That’s the same classification given to heroin and LSD.

LeMahieu, though, said earlier this year he believed his caucus was getting close to supporting a bill this session if medical marijuana was well regulated. Vos, however, told WISN-TV’s “UpFront” recently the Legislature wasn’t “that close” on a bill and it was unlikely one would pass this session unless “we can figure out a way to find some middle-ground consensus.”

Neubauer said she hoped to persuade the GOP to get medical marijuana across the finish line.

“I believe what Speaker Vos said was that they weren’t close on language on medical marijuana,” she said, referring to his comments on UpFront. “We’ll try to help them get some clarification and try to put
forward some proposals that we feel are extremely reasonable, thoughtful ways to approach this issue.”

Both repeated the fact that statewide polls such as the Marquette Law School poll have shown the majority of respondents favor legalizing medical marijuana. The Marquette poll in October found 64 percent of respondents favor legalizing marijuana in general.

Stay tuned. The budget debate is far from over. And the legislative session lasts two years.

For more, go to [www.wispolitics.com](http://www.wispolitics.com)

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