**Lawmakers' 2023 travel tab tops $150,000**

By WisPolitics.com

Outside groups reimbursed lawmakers for more than $150,000 in travel expenses last year to attend events around the country and abroad hosted by nonpartisan groups such as NCSL as well as the Jobs First Coalition, which backs GOP candidates, according to a WisPolitics.com review.

A WisPolitics check of lawmakers’ Statements of Economic Interests found reimbursements from the National Conference of State Legislatures, Jobs First Coalition, Council of State Government, American Legislative Exchange Council and the LGTBQ+ Victory Institute for events in various locations, such as Texas, Arizona and Florida.

The reimbursed travel also included travel abroad to countries such as Japan, Taiwan and Ireland.

In the Assembly, Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, reported the most travel with $35,250 in expenses paid by outside groups.

In the Senate, Sen. Mary Felzkowski, R-Tomahawk, reported the most at $13,543. That included American Legislative Exchange Council meetings with one in Washington, D.C.; she chairs ALEC’s Health and Human Services Committee. She also reported expenses for a Jobs First Coalition speaking event and National Council of Insurance Legislator meetings, with one in Minneapolis.

Felzkowski chairs NCOIL’s committee on financial services and multi-lines issues. Felzkowski, who chairs the state Senate’s Insurance and Small Business Committee, told WisPolitics NCOIL drafts model legislation.

“Participating in that I think is a very good thing for our state because then we get a Wisconsin influence into the state-based legislation that we’re doing right now,” she said.

Lawmakers must report expenses paid on their behalf related to government duties exceeding $50 such as: “attendance at a conference, presentation of a talk, participation in a meeting, or for a published work about issues initiated by or affecting state government or state agencies.”

Vos again took the top spot for reimbursed travel in the Assembly; last year’s WisPolitics review found Vos reported $14,295 in expenses.

The bulk of this year’s $35,250 was to attend a National Conference of State Legislatures conference. The report lists no details of the reimbursement other than it was for $25,727, and Vos’ office didn’t return messages seeking comment on his travels.

Vos served as NCSL president from 2019-2021 and in 2023.

He also listed reimbursement of $1,506 to “Give a talk” at a Jobs First Coalition event.

The Jobs First Coalition is a not-for-profit advocacy group whose website says its mission includes supporting policies to create and retain family-supporting jobs.

It’s also linked to Jobs First, a 501(4) that does independent expenditures in state races, typically to support Republicans, and the Jobs First Coalition Political Fund, a 527 that does a mix of independent expenditures and issue ads.

Vos’ wife, former GOP state Rep. Michelle Litjens, is a fundraising consultant who has been a lead fundraiser for the Jobs First Coalition.

Craig Peterson, a spokesperson for the Jobs First Coalition, said the 2023 event Vos and other lawmakers attended was in Miami.

“Normally our events are held in Wisconsin, but occasionally they are out of state,” Peterson wrote in a text message to WisPolitics. “Our members wanted to hear from legislative leaders at a meeting we held out of state, so as allowed by law, we reimbursed them for their travel expenses.”

One of the events Assembly members listed on their reports was a bipartisan leadership retreat. The office of Assembly Minority Leader Greta Neubauer, D-Racine, said Vos organized the event, hosted by the Johnson Foundation at Wingspread, a home in Wind Point designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

Neubauer’s office said elected leaders of both caucuses attended, and the goal was to build relationships between legislators and discuss how to work across the aisle effectively.

Along with the reimbursement from the Johnson Foundation for the Wingspread retreat, Vos listed reimbursement for conferences put on by the State Government Affairs Council Foundation and State Legislative Leaders Foundation.

A group that sought unsuccessfully to recall Vos criticized his ties to the State Legislative Leaders Foundation, which recall organizers claimed was linked to the Chinese Communist Party through a partnership with the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. Vos in response called people associated with the effort “morons” who are “out of touch with reality.”

*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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