WISPOLITICS: Evers, GOP lawmakers talking about a tax deal

By WisPolitics.com

Something very unusual is happening at the Capitol: Dem Gov. Tony Evers and top legislative GOP leaders have had discussions about a budget deal on tax cuts.

While there have been compromises during Evers' tenure, big compromises via personal discussions between the governor and Republican leaders have been rare.

But this year the meetings hold promise because of the big projected budget surplus and all the uncertainty in Washington, DC.

Evers on April 22 said while he’s open to negotiating a tax cut deal with GOP legislative leaders, any agreement would have to be part of the two-year state budget — not standalone legislation.

Evers said reaching a deal would be “tough” because of his demand it be done through the state budget that is now before the Legislature. GOP legislative leaders have said they prefer a tax cut signed into law before taking up the budget.

“I mean, first of all, we’re somewhat apart on what we want to do with taxes, but yeah, it has to be part of the budget,” Evers told reporters at an Earth Day event in Waunakee. “We just can’t do things one way and then, you know, just do taxes and then do spending, we have to look at it together. That’s the way it’s done every time that I’ve been governor, and I think just about every time. So a separate bill is not something I would support.”

WisPolitics first reported in mid-April that Evers met with Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, in person recently and discussed a possible agreement on a tax cut.

Evers on April 22 said the conversation was productive and staffers for the three elected officials have met at least one since those initial talks.

In a media availability ahead of the Assembly floor period, Vos didn’t rule out including the tax cuts in the state budget, adding he’d like further negotiations with the governor.

Vos said he had a “good discussion” with the governor and he’s hoping to meet again. He said he knows they can’t get a tax cut without seeing Evers’ priorities.

“The goal, again, is to try to find something that can actually get across the finish line,” Vos said. “I think the governor realizes that we’re not going to spend any more money unless we have the ability to reduce taxes and help folks get by with inflation.”

Meanwhile, LeMahieu declined to go into what he’s discussed with Evers and Vos. In the past, he advocated for targeting the third-highest tax bracket for a cut, while Vos has focused on exemptions for retirement income.

“We think it’s best for the state of Wisconsin to get a budget passed and provide tax relief,” LeMahieu said. “We’ll continue to try to work with the governor.”

Senate Minority Leader Dianne Hesselbein, D-Middleton, said she supports having discussions on tax cuts. Still, she urged caution amid economic uncertainty at the national level.

The Legislative Fiscal Bureau in January projected the state would finish the current fiscal year with a $4.3 billion surplus before seeing another $1.85 billion in tax collections over the 2025-27 budget.

But the Department of Revenue recently reported income and sales tax collections in March were down compared to the same month a year earlier. They are the two largest sources of tax collections for the state.

“The tariffs and the chaos and the confusion coming out of Washington, D.C., right now, I’m not sure we’re going to be able to do as much as Republicans thought in the beginning,” Hesselbein said.

Evers also dismissed Vos’ criticism of the state Supreme Court upholding his veto to increase per-pupil school aid for 400 years.

Vos, R-Rochester, last week said the veto amounts to a 400-year property tax increase for Wisconsinites.

But Evers argued “nothing’s changed” when it comes to the budget-making process.

“We have a budget that takes care of that issue,” Evers said. “We believe that there is sufficient money to increase some areas, especially education, but also to make sure that property taxes for the average property taxpayer stays the same. And so all we have to do is work together and start talking about it, we can’t just take one piece and say, ‘Oh, this is going to screw everything.’ We have to look at it in total, and … that’s what the process is about, and hopefully we can get it going.”

Evers made the comments during an Earth Day celebration at Governor Nelson State Park. He spoke alongside members of his administration to honor the day founded by former Gov. and U.S. Sen. Gaylord Nelson.

He noted skepticism about climate change and environmental issues at the federal level.

“This is our way to say, you know, you can ‘drill, baby drill’ if you want, but we’re going to take care of our parks, and we’re going to make sure that we are environmentalists as a state,” Evers said, citing a common catchphrase of President Donald Trump.

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