



Friday, February 16, 2007

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Governor Doyle Column: An Opportunity Budget for Middle Class Families

Last week, I unveiled my budget plan for the next two years – a budget that creates new opportunities for Wisconsin families by strengthening schools, making health care more affordable and creating new jobs. At the same time, it turns the corner on the fiscal excesses in the 1990s, leaving us with the largest budget surplus -- \$130 million – in years.

In the coming months, I'm confident my budget will be attacked by oil companies, tobacco companies and other special interests that didn't do as well under my budget as they hoped. But I won't make any apologies for putting the interests of hardworking Wisconsin families first.

Like my last two budgets, this budget begins with more hard cuts. We'll control the cost of prisoner health care, streamline the administration of Medicaid, cut information technology contractors, and sell state property. We'll eliminate duplicative human resource systems and use technology to save almost \$100 million throughout government.

Your state government will be leaner, more efficient, and more focused on the priorities of middle class families.

Not only that, but my opportunity budget for the middle class delivers on a promise I made last year: real, meaningful tax relief for hardworking families.

Specifically, my budget will allow families to deduct college tuition and fees up to \$6000 a year, as well as the cost of child care. And, we will make every penny you pay in health premiums tax free ... making health care more affordable for Wisconsin families.

From eliminating the tax on Social Security to ending the tax penalty on job creation, the budget includes more than a dozen tax cuts – tax cuts that will save Wisconsin families \$1.7 billion over the next four years.

My opportunity budget also makes investments in our core priorities – and the first of these is education.

We will fully fund our commitment to our public schools – including new initiatives to lower class sizes in the early grades, provide better nutrition in schools and expand four-year-old kindergarten.

At the same time, we will raise standards. I believe it's time that a third year of science and a third year of math were requirements for high school graduation. Given the competitive world in which we live, our kids will be at a serious disadvantage unless we ground them in math and science education.

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My budget also takes the next steps forward on the Wisconsin Covenant – a vital promise to every high school student that if they work hard, make the grade, and be a good citizen, we'll do our part by guaranteeing them a spot in the UW System, the Technical College System or a private college, along with a financial package that meets their family's needs.

Next, my budget takes historic steps forward in health care. By expanding access to coverage and reducing the cost, it will ensure that 98 percent of our citizens have access to affordable, comprehensive health coverage – more than any other state in the nation.

It starts by offering health coverage to every Wisconsin child. Families, regardless of income, will be able to buy an affordable policy for their kid, starting at about \$10 a month.

We will also extend health care coverage to tens of thousands of hardworking adults, which will not only get them the health care they need but will also reduce costs for everyone. When someone gets sick, the cost will be covered by their insurance, not passed along to yours and mine.

In addition, my budget will make important investments to create more economic opportunity for our citizens. We're cutting taxes on businesses, providing tax credits to promote bioenergy, and quadrupling funding for job training programs that help workers take a step up.

We will also provide important new support for manufacturers, which must remain the heart of our economy. Three quarters of our job training funds will be devoted to manufacturing, and we will also exempt their energy use from sales taxes to make them more competitive.

Finally, my budget makes important investments in our transportation infrastructure ... investments that will create tens of thousands of new jobs.

Some have argued for higher gas taxes or even highway tolls to pay for our transportation needs.

I think there's a better answer ... a fairer answer.

Instead of asking citizens to pay more in tolls or higher gas taxes, I think we should ask the oil companies to pay more.

The Big Oil companies made \$113 billion last year -- \$310 million a day – all at our expense. I believe Wisconsin consumers deserve a refund, and I have found a way to give it to them.

My budget includes an oil company assessment of 2.5% on every barrel of oil bound for Wisconsin. The oil companies who have gouged American consumers will be required to pay this assessment directly from their own considerable profits – with criminal penalties if they attempt to pass the cost on to consumers.

It's only fair.

Like I said, this is not a budget for the big oil companies or the big tobacco companies ... it is a budget for the middle class – and those trying to get there.

Ultimately, whether it's lowering taxes, expanding access to health care, improving education or creating jobs, we should all be working to make life more affordable for working families ... and to ensure that Wisconsin remains a place of opportunity for all.

That's a goal worthy of our best ... and worthy of Wisconsin's hardworking citizens.