



Local legislators talk surplus

New session will include writing 2023-25 state budget

By Andrew Dowd

LEADER-TELEGRAM STAFF

EAU CLAIRE — Politicians representing the Chippewa Valley in the state Legislature spoke Friday morning to local business and government leaders about the upcoming legislative session.

Eight legislators who won in November's elections talked at the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce's Eggs and Issues

gathering about what they're expecting as the state begins to draft its next budget.

"In the next six months, the Legislature will write a document that will probably spend \$90 billion," said state Rep. Warren Petryk, R-town of Washington.

Gov. Tony Evers is expected to propose a 2023-25 state budget in February, followed by the state Legislature creating its version of the budget, which then goes to Evers for his signature before the end of June.



Petryk



Pronschinske



Smith



James

One of the big questions facing Wisconsin politicians is how to use a \$6.6 billion surplus the state is projected to have at the end of its current budget.

"It's something that I don't think anybody expected to be this big," said state Rep. Treig Pronschinske, R-Mondovi.

State Sen. Jeff Smith, D-town of Brunswick, attributed the

surplus to smart spending of federal COVID-19 relief funds, giving the credit for that to fellow Democrat Evers and not the GOP-controlled state Legislature.

"We know it's federal dollars that made that happen and it leaves us in a good place," Smith said.

Legislators speaking during Friday's business breakfast at the Pablo Center at the Confluence said they are seeking ideas from constituents on how the surplus could be spent.

"It's up to fellow leaders of

communities to approach us with ideas you think are good," Pronschinske said.

Some potential uses of surplus dollars did bubble up among the panelists.

Jesse James, R-Altoona, who will be switching chambers from the Assembly to the Senate with January's inauguration, said Republican leaders have been talking about using the surplus to provide tax relief or advancing other tax reform plans.

"I do believe we will use some of that surplus for those purposes," he said.

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Rep. Dave Armstrong, R-Rice Lake, said applying the surplus toward boosting shared revenue and transportation aids for communities got some support during the last Republican caucus.

As a former Rice Lake city councilman, Armstrong said he would favor using the surplus to provide help to municipalities across the state.

"Shared revenue," he said, "which I'm all in for at this point."

His response to the question got murmurs of approval from the audience on Friday morning, which included numerous local city and county government officials.

Newly-elected Rep. Karen Hurd, R-Fall Creek, also mentioned helping out local governments, specifically with general transportation aids and shared revenues, is among her priorities as well.

Hurd, a trustee on the Fall Creek Village Board, was elected on Nov. 8 to the state Assembly seat that

James is vacating due to his election to the 23rd state Senate District.

United front

All eight of the legislators at Friday morning's panel said they'd put their efforts behind the second half of funding for constructing a \$344.5 million Science and Health Sciences building at UW-Eau Claire.

"We're going to fight and probably get it included in the budget and get this project done," Petryk said.

Though he's optimistic about the project's full funding making it into the final version of the state budget, Petryk acknowledged that rising construction prices could prompt legislators from other parts of the state to oppose it.

The state's 2019-21 budget included \$109 million toward the new building, but left the second part of the funding for a future budget. The second portion of funding did not get into the 2021-23 budget and construction prices have risen



State Rep. Jodi Emerson (D-Eau Claire) speaks as Rep.-elect Karen Hurd (R-Fall Creek) looks on at the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce's Eggs & Issues Breakfast Dec. 16. Staff Photo by Branden Nall

in the meantime. Instead of the \$147 million originally planned for the second part of the building's funding, the request has grown to \$235.5 million due to inflation.

Local politicians from both sides of the aisle said they will push for that funding to get into the 2023-25 state budget.

"We are a united front that this needs to happen," state Rep. Jodi Emerson, D-Eau Claire, said.

The commitment toward

the project also extends out to more rural legislative districts that do not include Eau Claire.

"I want to see the kids who grow up in my district go to a college that's as good as it can be," Pronschinske said.

State Rep. Rob Summerfield, R-Bloomer, said he's optimistic for the project



Armstrong



Hurd



Summerfield

based on the UW System Board of Regents putting the new UW-Eau Claire building high on its budget request.

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