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KICKING THE CAN DOWN THE ROAD
State Senator Janis Ringhand

It is an honor to serve as the Senate Democrat’s representative on the Building Commission. The State of Wisconsin Building Commission was created in 1949 to oversee the planning, improvement, maintenance and renovation of state facilities. In 1969, the voters of Wisconsin passed a constitutional amendment allowing the state to issue debt, the Building Commission’s responsibilities were expanded to include the oversight of public debt.

In his 2015-2017 budget, Governor Walker relies heavily on public debt to fund transportation projects, public services and a new arena for the Milwaukee Bucks, while “kicking the can down the road” when it comes to many popular and needed state projects.

The Governor has recommended borrowing $1.3 billion to fund transportation projects. This is a continuation of a disturbing trend to “kick the can down the road” in regard to funding our transportation infrastructure and maintenance. Twenty years ago, 6.5% of all transportation funds were used to pay down debt from previous borrowing. At the end of this fiscal year which ends June 30, that number will have jumped to 18%. Governor Walker’s budget proposal would add an additional $1.3 billion in debt and would increase the overall debt payment to 25% of all transportation funds. We cannot borrow our way out of this mess and delaying new projects and highway maintenance will only make the problem greater with each passing year.

The Governor has also proposed borrowing $220 million to build a new arena for the Milwaukee Bucks. This is a tough sell in the legislature next to the Governor’s proposals to cut $300 million from the University of Wisconsin and $127 million from K-12 education in order to balance a $2.2 billion deficit that resulted from “kicking the can down the road” in the last state budget.

The Governor has also proposed a moratorium for the popular Wisconsin Stewardship Fund. Organizations representing sportsmen, conservationists and the tourism industry have roundly criticized this proposal as a thinly veiled attempt to eliminate the Stewardship Fund altogether. Even though the Stewardship Fund has been authorized for $12.5 million in bonding authority for maintenance projects, the Governor is “kicking the can down the road” by zeroing out these funds for state park maintenance in order to have a campaign slogan for his presidential ambitions.

Two years ago, the Building Commission authorized the construction of new dormitories on the campuses of UW-Whitewater and Eau Claire, which are experiencing severe housing shortages. The bonding for both projects will be paid through student fees on campus and do not require taxpayer funding. Despite the critical need for these projects, the Department of Administration has chosen to “kick the can down the road” by refusing to take any steps needed to design, bid and construct the residence halls. Lack of action by DOA has caused these projects, originally scheduled to be completed by September 2016, to fall two years behind schedule, even though student fees are being collected for the projects.

The disturbing trend of “kicking the can down the road” is unsustainable and places the burden of paying for today’s projects on the backs of our children and grandchildren. We owe it to future generations of Wisconsinites to do better.