

State Representative District 31A

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SESSION UPDATE

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GOVERNOR: ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

Last week, the Governor delivered his State of the State speech to a joint session of the State Legislature and members of the State Supreme Court. I have to admit, some of what he had to say sounded good; better funding for our schools, health care for every Minnesotan and putting a cap on property taxes. However, as we look closer, the very things the Governor says he is advocating for have been hurt since he took office..

On Education:

The Governor said education made Minnesota what it is today and education will make us what we will become tomorrow.

Fact 1: Under this Governor, public schools received the first-ever funding cut, as well as years of flat funding that did not even cover inflation. The result has been teacher lay-offs, larger class sizes, limited programs and increasing fees.

Fact 2: Over the last five years, average tuition for a full time undergraduate MnSCU student at a state university has gone up 74%; tuition for two-year students has gone up an average of 68%. Despite this, the Governor did not indicate any support for higher education funding in his speech.

Fact 3: College graduates are leaving school with record-high debt forced on

them by escalating tuition and fees.

The Governor wants to require that at least 70% of school funding be spent in the classroom.

Fact 1: This classroom funding does not include libraries, athletics, counselors, social workers, nurses, secretaries, custodians, curriculum development, staff development, administration, printing, media centers, food, heating, electricity and general maintenance.

Fact 2: Most schools in our area meet this 70% benchmark and still have class sizes in the 30's and 40's.

Fact 3: Even the Governor's own party failed to support his 70% mandate, moving it out of committee on a 15-14 vote with no recommendation for further action.

The Governor called for the inclusion of digital literacy as part of school standards.

Fact: Computers and media centers are not covered under the 70% mandate the Governor is proposing.

The Governor called for quick passage of early childhood education initiatives.

Fact 1: In his 2004-2005 budget, the Governor proposed cutting almost \$11 million from the state's early childhood

education fund.

Fact 2: Reimbursement rates to providers under child care assistance programs were frozen at 2003 levels during fiscal year 2004-2005.

On Health Care:

The Governor called for health care coverage for all Minnesotans and stated that people excluded from health insurance tend to be the working poor.

Fact 1: Since this Governor took office, there are over 77,000 more Minnesotans without health insurance. Last session alone, he proposed cutting over 40,000 Minnesotans from MinnesotaCare, the state health plan for working people who do not have access to health care through their employer.

Fact 2: The average family is already paying an extra \$900 per year for insurance premiums to cover the cost of medical treatment for those people in our state who do not have insurance. As more people are cut, those premiums will continue to increase.

On Transportation:

The Governor said he implemented the largest transportation funding package in modern history.

Fact 1: The largest transportation funding the Governor is referring to was in 2003, when he shook hands with the Taxpayers League, pulled out the state credit card, gave an IOU to the Feds, called current resources "new money" and labeled it a "Transportation Package".

Fact 2: One of the more disappointing developments of the session was Governor Pawlenty's veto of the

bipartisan transportation bill. This veto added up to lost revenues of \$16.2 million for Winona County over the next ten years. Instead, they will receive only \$3.9 million.

Houston County would have seen its funding more than triple from \$3.4 million to \$12.4 million if the Governor had not vetoed the bill. **Fact:** In his State of the State speech, the Governor did not recommend any money for outstate transportation projects.

On Property taxes:

The Governor called for a cap on property taxes.

Fact 1: The Governor's cuts to Local Government Aid, Market Value Credit and school funding have forced local governments to raise property taxes to cover local expenses.

Fact 2: Over the past three years, state property taxes have gone up by more than \$1 billion, with another 10.2 percent increase predicted for next year.

Fact 3: Despite escalating property taxes and the budget surplus, the Governor did not advocate for any property tax relief in his speech.

On the Budget Surplus:

The Governor claims to have completed the biggest financial turnaround in Minnesota history.

Fact 1: More and more, Minnesotans are paying for services that used to be provided by the state.

Fact 2: A good portion of the budget surplus can be credited to the drastic increase in fees that have been passed by this Governor. In fact, since he took office and signed his "No New Taxes" pledge, by the end of the 2006-2007 biennium, fees will have gone up by \$893

million. If you include the tobacco fee, the total is over \$1 billion.

Fact 3: The budget surplus also includes revenue from the Governor's tobacco "fee", which is being challenged in court as being illegal. If the current court ruling is upheld, the state is in deficit nearly \$200 million annually.

So, while the Governor may have outlined some big ideas for our state in his address last week, he was sadly missing on substance. We need our leaders to offer real solutions to real problems, not sound bytes. Politics should be about the improvement of people's lives, not producing bullet points for campaign literature.

Short takes

Brevity ... the soul of wit

You will hear that while the Higher Education Finance bill isn't perfect, it is a glass of water half full. I do not represent glasses of water. I represent parents and students who have to pay these record increases in tuition and then take a decade or more to pay off the debt they have acquired to gain an education. The only thing a glass of water has to do with this bill is that once their tuition bills are paid, and they pay off a decade of debt, the only thing they will be able to afford to drink will be a glass of water, and it will be half full.



Rep. Gene Pelowski, Winona

Opinion page editor Je
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