

OUR OPINION

Budget deal sounds OK

Our stubborn state leaders have finally compromised on Wisconsin's incredibly late budget. The fine print of the deal still needs careful scrutiny. But the highlights announced Friday night appear reasonable and worthy of support.

Assembly Speaker Mike Huebsch and other Republican leaders successfully eliminated the Democrats' convoluted attempts to tax hospitals and oil companies.

The Legislature should approve the budget compromise announced Friday — assuming no surprises emerge. The Senate also needs to quickly ban the "Frankenstein" veto.

Taxing health care providers would have only made health services more expensive for ordinary people. And taxing oil companies ultimately would have raised prices at the pumps — assuming the scheme was even legal.

Yet one tax hike that survived and makes a lot of sense is the \$1-per-pack

increase on **cigarettes**. Led by Gov. Jim Doyle and Senate Majority Leader Judy Robson, Democrats wisely pushed to more than double the **cigarette** tax. The extra revenue will help pay for health costs related to smoking.

Another huge benefit of jacking up the price of **cigarettes** is that teenagers will have a harder time affording them.

The Democrats also deserve credit for ensuring that Wisconsin continues to invest heavily in education. Public schools will get a \$525 million boost, while state universities will get \$159 million more — including dollars for a growth agenda important to Wisconsin's economy.

Doyle's big victory is a significant expansion of health insurance coverage for lower-income people and virtually all children. Assuming his BadgerCare Plus proposal plays out as he predicts, Wisconsin could become a leader in expanding health care coverage to most of its population.

One worrisome move is the Legislature's and governor's agreement to raid \$200 million from the state patient compensation fund. This will set up a potential budget gap two years from now — on top of financial problems created by other accounting tricks.

How the budget, which covers spending from July 1, 2007, to June 30, 2009, balances out remains to be seen.

Yet for now, Friday's compromise may be as good as it gets with the current crew of politicians at the Capitol.

Wisconsin may even escape a Halloween scare from Doyle's "Frankenstein" veto pen. Doyle said Friday he would make only a few vetoes — not the elaborate and outrageous partial vetoes that create new law from scratch.

That means the Legislature should now ban the "Frankenstein" veto. It's time for Sen. Fred Risser, D-Madison, to finally send the ban to the full Senate for a vote. Then ordinary citizens can have their say in a statewide referendum. Risser has been using the budget standoff as an excuse for inaction.

Voters need to keep the pressure on for a return to good government in Wisconsin. Our leaders need to get their work done on time without juvenile stunts and irresponsible gambles. Friday's budget compromise needs to be the start of better things to come.

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