

After the November general election, each caucus in the legislature held elections to select their leadership for the upcoming 2021-2022 legislative session. The assembly republicans were the first to select their leaders with Speaker Robin Vos again being elected by his colleagues to lead the state assembly after beating a challenge by Representative Rob Brooks. Next session will be the fifth session with Vos at the helm as Speaker, along with Majority Leader Jim Steineke who was also reelected after beating Representative Cody Horlacher. The biggest change in leadership for the assembly republicans came when Representative Dan Knodl ran for reelection as caucus chair but was challenged and defeated by Representative Tyler Vorpagel.

*[insert Vos and Steineke, with captions “Robin Vos, Speaker” “Jim Steineke, Assembly Majority Leader”]*

Assembly democrats reelected Representative Gordon Hintz to again serve as their minority leader after picking up two seats on November 3rd. Also reelected to serve in leadership positions for the assembly democrats were Reps. Diane Hesselbein (assistant minority leader), Mark Spreitzer (caucus chair), and Beth Meyers (caucus secretary).
*[insert Hintz with caption “Gordon Hintz, Assembly Minority Leader”]*

Senate democrats reelected Senator Janet Bewley to serve as minority leader, a position she assumed earlier this year when Jen Shilling announced her early retirement from the state senate. Senator Janis Ringhand rebuffed a challenge for assistant minority leader from former minority leader Chris Larson.

*[insert Bewley with caption “Janet Bewley, Senate Minority Leader]*

Finally, the caucus that will see the biggest changes in leadership for next session will be in with the state senate republican caucus. With Senator Scott Fitzgerald’s elevation to replace F. James Sensenbrenner in the U.S. Congress, there was a contested election to replace him as majority leader. After four tied ballots, Senator Roger Roth withdrew from the running and asked for a unanimous ballot for the election of Senator Devin LeMahieu to replace Fitzgerald as majority leader. Senator Chris Kapenga was also unanimously elected to serve as senate president after Senator Alberta Darling pulled her name out of the running for that leadership position. *[insert Lemahieu with caption “Devin LeMahieu, Senate Majority Leader]*

Senator Majority Leader-Elect LeMahieu made his first appointment as leader when he named Senator Howard Marklein as the new Co-Chair of the Joint Committee on Finance, replacing longtime co-chair Alberta Darling. Marklein joins Representative John Nygren who was again named by Speaker Vos to serve as the Assembly Co-Chair of the Joint Committee on Finance. *[insert Marklein and Nygren with captions “Howard Marklein, JFC Co-Chair” and “John Nygren, JFC Co-Chair]*

After inauguration in early January, the next and most important order of business, will be for the republican controlled houses of the legislature and democrat Governor Tony Evers to settle on a state budget. Passage of a state budget is required by law to be signed into law by July 1 of each odd numbered year. If no budget is completed by July 1, state government continues to run at the spending levels outlined in the previously passed two-year budget.

With a more conservative and larger 20-member republican senate caucus and a still large conservative majority in state assembly (61 seats), along with this being the final budget for Governor Evers’ prior to a reelection bid (if he chooses to run again), this will likely be a very challenging state budget to get signed on time. State revenues are down due to the ongoing pandemic so cuts, tax increases, or using surplus tax dollars that have been set aside in the state’s “rainy day fund” are all likely options to be explored to balance the budget.

In addition to making sure a housing friendly state budget is signed into law, we will also be working on a number of provisions that were recently passed by the WBA Board of Directors as part of our 2021-2022 Advocacy Agenda. We are already revieing a bill draft to make some changes to our contractor certification requirements. We believe these changes will help raise the quality of those that get a DSPS credential which allows them to pull a building permit. We will need members to lobby their respective members of the state assembly and state senate to pass these reforms next session.

Some of the additional issues we are likely to advocate on include:

* making sure there are no challenges to receiving an occupancy permit from a municipality if an inspector allows a builder to proceed without a final inspection
* changes to TRANS 233 to allow flexibilities for minor projects in highway right of ways, utility easements, and buffer areas (landscaping, signs, parking lots) that the current rule does not allow
* continuing to research and advocate for changes to allow for construction of more “workforce housing”

One issue we may have to beat back this session deals with possible changes to the statewide residential construction code, the Uniform Dwelling Code (UDC). The Governor’s Task Force on Climate Change is calling for a number of troubling changes to our current code that include “updating the state energy codes based on model codes, including for EV readiness”; “updating the state energy codes beyond generally accepted model codes”, and “allowing local communities to implement their own ordinances that are more stringent than the state energy codes so long as they clearly provide how to comply with the state and local codes.” These changes would most likely have a negative effect on housing affordability if passed next session. Allowing municipalities to break the uniformity of the UDC and creating a patchwork of local codes, similar to Illinois, would not only increase the cost of housing to Wisconsin families, but also be a regulatory nightmare for builders who have customers in various municipalities.

We look forward to passing additional polices, and in some case stopping others to decrease the cost of housing in our state.