

Opinion Editorial for March 3 Leader-Telegram

Governor's Budget is an Investment in Northwest Wisconsin

James C. Schmidt, Chancellor, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

While the weather forecast has been a constant “snow, snow, more snow,” there is better news for Northwest Wisconsin coming from Madison. I recently made a trip to the Capitol with 100 Chippewa Valley business leaders as part of the Chippewa Valley Rally. We had great meetings with legislators—including a luncheon appearance by former Governor Tommy Thompson and a visit with Governor Tony Evers. We were there to let Madison know that this region is ready to lead when it comes to leveraging public education in service to growing our workforce and economy.

This past Thursday, Governor Evers announced his proposed budget for the coming biennium—more good news. While this is just the beginning of what will be weeks of debate and negotiation with legislators, this 2019-21 budget outlines some important investments that can have a direct impact on the Chippewa Valley and Northwest Wisconsin.

Foremost is the Governor's investment in education with a proposed \$150 million to the University of Wisconsin System. This budget recognizes the importance of preserving the quality and accessibility of higher education in Wisconsin. It continues the freeze on undergraduate resident student tuition, helping to keep college affordable for more families. And, it also includes funding for a two-percent pay plan in each year of the biennium for our employees, essential if we are to retain exceptional faculty whose average salaries fall seven to 18 percent *below* market rates.

These investments are vital if we are to continue to be strong partners for Wisconsin. As Chancellor at UW-Eau Claire, I have the privilege of seeing firsthand the direct impact that our university has on this region. UW-System estimates that every dollar invested in higher education returns \$23 to Wisconsin, through greater employment, higher wages, business start-ups and services provided to our communities. That kind of return on taxpayer investment just makes good sense.

We want to be good stewards of that investment. To that end, UW-Eau Claire has detailed plans on how we will use the proposed investment to accelerate the momentum we are helping to build in the Chippewa Valley.

We will expand our nursing program at UWEC-Barron County to answer growing healthcare demands in rural northwest Wisconsin. We want future nurses to be able to study and then live and work closer to home. We are also, in support of our innovative collaboration with Mayo Clinic Health Systems, creating new science programs that will prepare talent for our region, including offering degrees in Biomedical Engineering and Bioinformatics. These specialized programs of the future will not only support growing demand for talented professionals, but also help our region thrive as a hub for healthcare excellence.

I am excited about the potential the Governor's investment in higher education can unleash in our region. At UW-Eau Claire we know that this budget is just the first step in the legislative process. There will surely be changes, but we also know that the Chippewa Valley legislative delegation has a long and proud history of working together for this region. We've pledged to work with them and with Governor Evers to advance what's good for northwest Wisconsin, for our students and for the future we all want for the Chippewa Valley.