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State Senator Michael Ellis challenges both candidates and constituents

By Jennifer A. Gritt
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"You have an obligation and a right to know how these candidates are going to balance the budget," Republican State Senator Michael Ellis told the audience at Friday's Heart of the Valley Chamber of Commerce breakfast meeting at F&M Bank in Kaukauna.

Referring to the recent campaign tactics of gubernatorial candidates Jim Doyle and Scott McCallum, Ellis declared: "These ads are an insult to the intelligence of the people of Wisconsin." While the ads currently running on television attempt to assess blame for the state's current budget crisis, Ellis criticized both candidates for not offering any solution.

"This is a mess that didn't happen overnight," Ellis explained. "Everyone (in the state government) is responsible. What are they going to do when they get elected?"

Ellis provided a handout explaining his view on how the current budget crisis came about and where it stands today. Addressing the budget repair bill recently signed by Governor McCallum, Ellis stated: "The governor and legislators who passed this disaster proclaim that it eliminates a \$1.1 billion dollar deficit, balancing the books without raising taxes. Don't believe them."

The current bill "actually creates a \$1.24 billion deficit going into the next budget and sets the stage for an all but inevitable tax increase in 2003," he said.

Explaining that current programs were being funded with the money from the sale of the tobacco settlement, Ellis emphasized that the \$1.3 billion was just a one-time revenue source. With new revenue only estimated to be \$370 million for 2003, Ellis stressed that the state is planning a "billion dollars in spending (yet we) don't have a billion in revenue."

Outlining a list of state-funded programs, which include prescription drugs, education and shared revenue, Ellis stressed that the current legislature approved a bill that "didn't cut anything. There is no way that either of these guys

is going to balance the budget and not raise taxes," he concluded.

Education spending was discussed at length. Of the \$11 billion state budget, "\$5.2 billion goes to K-12 schools," he said. Residents and Ellis expressed concern over the state policy to fund two-thirds of local education spending. Expensive school construction projects have absorbed a substantial amount of Wisconsin taxpayer monies as a result, and Ellis called for reform.

He will introduce legislation that would base education funding on a community's economic health. Wealthier school districts should receive 10 percent state funding while poorer districts up to 90 percent. This would help deter what Ellis sees as a "give them whatever they want and we'll put it on a credit card" attitude that has dictated the state's behavior over the past several years.

When questioned how this would stop local school boards from approving the construction of expensive new schools, Ellis said his legislation would require that construction plans be reviewed by a state building commission to determine the necessary expenditures from the excessive.

"If you want state-of-the-art schools," Ellis declared, "then property taxpayers have to review the plans" because they'll have to pay for it.

In the end, Ellis stressed that "the legislature and the governor have demonstrated their unwillingness to make tough decisions" concerning state-funded programs.

"There was no will to even freeze spending at current levels much less make any real cuts in spending." As a result, Wisconsin residents "are faced with an almost certain tax increase in the future." "The debate next year will not be whether to tax. It will be over who and how to tax."

With the gubernatorial candidates already "discussing hiking tobacco taxes and eliminating sales tax exemptions," Ellis feels that those proposals "are only the beginning."