

EDITORIAL

The issue: Gov. Jim Doyle's State of the State address.

Our view: With the budget tight and tax revenues falling, Doyle and lawmakers must pursue practical, low-cost goals.

State's money is limited, so keep goals within reach

State of the State addresses, like their national counterparts, are typically pep talks that mix feel-good bipartisanship with laundry lists of a governor's goals.

The speech Gov. Jim Doyle delivered Wednesday to a joint session of the Legislature fit that model. Last year was marked by a bitter partisan deadlock over the state budget; in his address, Doyle, a Democrat, seemed to be trying to congratulate every lawmaker in the chamber — particularly Assembly Republicans — for some piece of bipartisan legislation or other. On at least four occasions, he asked Democrats and Republicans to work together.

And the list of goals was there, from economic development to education to health care, including numerous ideas Doyle has spoken of previously. (For example, for the fourth consecutive year Doyle called for adding a third year of math and science to high school graduation requirements.)

Missing, however, were any ground-breaking new proposals. The reasons for that are obvious: With the state's budget in chronic deficit and the national economy possibly sliding toward recession, there simply isn't any extra money to pay for new pet projects. In fact, preliminary reports show state income and sales tax collections for the second half of 2007 were hundreds of millions of dollars lower than projected.

And, despite the bipartisan back-slapping, Republican leaders bristled at the potential price tags of several of Doyle's proposals. For instance, a health-insurance purchasing pool for small businesses, dubbed BadgerChoice, would cost the state an estimated \$100 million annually. Because Assembly Speaker Mike Huebsch, R-West Salem, already has criticized the idea because of its cost, it's safe to say it's a nonstarter.

Furthermore, there's little time for major legislative accomplishments in 2008: The legislative session is scheduled to end in mid-March. After that, most lawmakers will be busy campaigning to retain their seats in the November election.

Nonetheless, even with such limitations, there is a chance the Legislature could accomplish some of the more modest — and less costly — goals Doyle outlined Wednesday:

■ **Raising the minimum wage.** As Doyle correctly pointed out, the lowest-wage workers — those making \$6.50 an hour — are those who struggle the most with rising gas prices and other costs. They're also the most likely to suffering during an economic downturn. We agree that it's time to index the minimum wage to inflation rather than allow it to lag for years, as has been traditional.

■ **Passing a statewide smoking ban.** While such a ban makes some businesspeople — especially tavern owners — nervous, it will immediately improve public health statewide. Coupled with the recent cigarette-tax increase, it may encourage more smokers to kick the habit, and will also reduce the amount of dangerous secondhand smoke nonsmokers inhale. Ultimately, this will lead to a healthier population and lower health costs. As a side benefit, it may even increase taverns' revenues as nonsmokers become more frequent customers.

■ **Ratifying the Great Lakes Compact.** The agreement among eight states bordering the lakes would protect the region's greatest natural resource from thirsty Southwestern states, as well as allow a regional approach to challenges such as climate change.

True, these aren't lofty goals, but they aren't budget-busters either. And, given the Legislature's track record, they may be the most we can expect from the Capitol in the coming months.

— Tom Giffey, editorial page editor