

UW regents relied on private phone, face-to-face conferences for budget briefing

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PHOTO BY MICHELLE STOCKER

UW System Regent Margaret Farrow, shown here in February, said Thursday there would have been a lot more public discussion of the 2016-2017 budget if regents hadn't had private briefings.

The University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents approved a \$6.2 billion operating budget that hikes student services and housing fees without debate and only a smattering of questions Thursday, thanks to a series of private briefings.

“We’re sitting real quietly now because we’ve had a great chance to have at it in hour-long meetings with staff on the phone,” Regent Margaret Farrow said as regents unanimously adopted the 2016-2017 budget at UW-Milwaukee Thursday. “Without that, we would have had five more hours here, asking what would have been stupid questions.”

Regents may have had the opportunity to “have at it” before adopting a UW System budget for the second year of the state’s biennial budget, but the public did not.

Contrary to recent practice and the announced intention to release budget documents a few days before consideration by regents, UW System administrators released details of the budget to the public only as regents were gathered to act on it Thursday.

UW System spokesperson Alex Hummel described the budget briefings as “one-on-one, or sometimes two-by-two, phone or face-to-face” meetings with regents. Most occurred this week and were led by Julie Gordon and Freda Harris from the UW System’s finance division, who also made a presentation on the budget to regents at their public meeting Thursday, he said.

State open meetings law requires that discussions of policy involving half the members or more of the governing board of a public body – like the Board of Regents – be held in public with prior public notice.

Media outlets raised questions about the delayed release of budget details, which Hummel said was the decision of board president Regina Millner and UW administrators.

Release of budget documents was not delayed to complete the private briefings, he said.

In lieu of budget details, what system administrators selected to highlight this week with a [blog post](#) and [video](#) by system president Ray Cross, was the regents’ request to the Higher Educational Aids Board to increase Wisconsin Grant funding to UW students.

Regents voted unanimously Thursday to ask HEAB for \$12.7 million more in funding for grants to UW students in the next biennium, starting in 2017-18 school year. Funding for UW students for the need-based state grants has been at \$58.3 million annually since the 2010-2011 academic year, while the average cost to attend a UW campus has risen more than 15 percent.

“This proposal reflects our commitment to UW System students, their families and a stronger future for Wisconsin,” Cross said in a statement released after the board’s approval. “Affordability is a top priority.”

Regents also asked for an increase in funding for Wisconsin Grants for UW students in the run-up to the state’s 2015-2017 budget, when that funding stayed level but Gov. Scott Walker cut overall state aid to the UW System was cut by \$250 million.

With Walker’s tuition freeze continuing through the upcoming academic year, the budget approved Thursday by regents raised student fees an average of \$59 at four-year-institutions. About \$41 of the increase reflects major projects previously approved by regents, as well as student-supported projects such as mental health programming. The board also increased room and board rates at the four-year institutions by an average of 1.7 percent.

Fund balances, which fueled outrage by Republican legislative leaders in 2013 when they neared \$1 billion, continue to be tapped to cover expenses. Officials reported the balances are down \$75 million this year over last year and are projected to be drawn down an additional \$160 million by the end of the 2017 fiscal year.

Overall general state support for the UW System, adjusted for inflation, is the lowest it has been in UW System history, Cross told regents.

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