



Legislative Fiscal Bureau

Adding It Up

Bob Lang's nonpartisan number crunching helps Wisconsin legislators navigate tough financial times.

BY STEVEN WALTERS

For 31 years, Wisconsin state government has run on Robert "Bob" W. Lang's numbers.

As director of the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, and the nation's longest-serving senior budget adviser to legislators, Lang has seen it all: New leaders with new priorities when party control flips. Recessions that turn tax collection forecasts into guesstimates.

Steven Walters is Capitol bureau chief for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

The inability of elected officials to close a chronic budget gap. A Legislature growing more partisan by the day.

But Lang, who turns 65 in August and has no plans to retire, has more than survived.

Bob is a Capitol institution, like the badger statue outside the governor's office whose nose is shiny from school children rubbing it for good luck.

In his 2005 budget address, Democratic Governor Jim Doyle may have paid Lang and his staff the ultimate compliment.

Although he has his own budget staff, Doyle

said: "I've based my budget on the conservative estimates of the Legislative Fiscal Bureau," which Lang has directed since 1977.

Lang says he lives in a world that doesn't care whether a legislator is an R or a D.

"Facts aren't partisan," Lang says from his office a few steps from the Capitol. "There are some 60,000 people who have sent each member of the Assembly here, and 180,000 for each member of the Senate. We really think it's important that we do the best that we can for that individual to represent those people."

THE LONG ON LANG



Bob Lang, who started at the Fiscal Bureau in 1971 after a stint in Vietnam and holding brand new masters' degrees in political science and education, has plenty of interests aside from number crunching.

When he's not in Madison, Lang has a vacation condominium in Spring Green, a wooded, rural area west of Madison where he can indulge in two of his favorite hobbies—golf and attending American Players Theatre.

He's a Shakespeare aficionado. "The language is incredible, remarkable," Lang says of the Bard. "I like certain parts of certain plays—*Merchant of Venice*, the role of Shylock is just such an intriguing role."

He has been repeatedly honored for his professional and civic work. In November 2005, the Wisconsin Assembly formally passed a resolution honoring Lang's almost 38 years of work with Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Dane County.

Madison's Rotary Club gave him the Humanitarian Service Award in 2005. He won the United Way of Dane County's Community Volunteer Award in 2006. In 2001, he received the Legislative Staff Achievement Award from the National Association of Legislative Fiscal Offices.

And the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management and the National Tax Association jointly gave him the coveted Steven D. Gold award in 2007.

NONPARTISAN NUMBERS

With the Legislature split between the parties—and Republicans fighting to keep control of the Assembly—the numbers and materials produced by Lang and his 34 staff are crucial.

But, Lang says, "Leadership recognizes that as soon as the Fiscal Bureau starts to shade its analysis, or shade its information in favor of one position or another, we lose our credibility. Once it's gone, it can never come back."

Assembly Speaker Mike Huebsch, a Republican, says he turns to Lang for non-partisan numbers and materials to brief members of his party and negotiate with Democrats. He calls Lang a "rock" he relies on for "straight and direct information."

The Legislature's top Democrat, Senate Majority Leader Russ Decker, said Wisconsin is "very lucky" to have Lang.

"He is a true professional whose knowl-

edge and skill have rightly earned him the respect of everyone in our state government," Decker says. "His ability to answer any question we throw at him, combined with his talent for recruiting a great team for his department, have earned him well-deserved national recognition."

One lawmaker who has been in the Capitol as long as Lang is Senator Michael Ellis. He respects Lang but dislikes his "base-year doubled" budget model, which ignores the spending growth in a program from one year

to the next. Ellis keeps his own budget numbers on a blackboard in his office.

Ellis says Lang's power in the Capitol has increased because members of the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee—a unusual panel created in 1911 to review all spending and taxing issues—are being appointed for their political connections and not because they have the courage to fix the ongoing deficit.

Eight Assembly members and eight senators serve on the Finance Committee.

Ellis says Wisconsin governors and his fellow lawmakers are hemmed in by their "no new taxes" campaign promises, yet they face demands from special-interest groups who always want more cash.

That means "they have to go to Lang" for options to try to achieve their political goals, Ellis says.

Ellis calls Lang a "master politician" for being able to work with legislators of both parties for so long. The two are friends; Lang keeps a group photo that includes Ellis in his Fiscal Bureau office.

BALANCING TAXING AND SPENDING

"Government is all about taxing and spending," Lang says. "You and I can't build a road because we don't have enough money. So we collectively tax and build a road or a college or whatever."

When money is short, families either raise more money or spend less.

But, Lang points out, governments don't work that way. "You try to minimize revenues and maximize expenditures. You want to minimize the amount of money the taxpayers are providing," Lang says. "At the same time, you recognize there are constituents out there who need our assistance."

Lang says he does not have too much Capitol clout.

"I understand that knowledge is really important," he says. "I would hope they wouldn't view it as power, but view it as



ASSEMBLY SPEAKER
MIKE HUEBSCH
WISCONSIN



SENATE MAJORITY
LEADER
RUSS DECKER
WISCONSIN

knowledge and institutional memory. I don't have any desire to be a decision maker."

Decision maker or not, Lang's numbers carry a lot of weight. When the governor hands lawmakers his budget, the Fiscal Bureau then breaks it down. Lawmakers don't take the governor's budget seriously until they have Lang's summaries in hand.

STRICT STAFF STANDARDS

To maintain the Fiscal Bureau's nonpartisan reputation, Lang insists that those he hires agree to strict limits on their political activities. But staff members don't seem to mind those restraints. The average staff member has worked for Lang almost 16 years, and his team leaders have worked for him an average of 22 years.

"We don't contribute. We don't go to fundraisers. We don't have yard signs. That means not only for state elections, but for local elections," Lang says, laying out some of his rules. "We don't sign petitions. We just keep away from those activities."

In return, Fiscal Bureau staff members say their boss is their advocate, he values them and puts in even more hours than they do at budget-crunch times.

Lang has helped train generations of state budget analysts now working across the nation. He's so respected nationally that just being able to list Wisconsin's Fiscal Bureau on your résumé can get you hired in another capitol.

California fiscal analyst Liz Hill says she got a call from Lang telling her that one of his budget analysts was moving to California. Would Hill consider interviewing that analyst?

Hill did more than interview her.

"On the strength of Bob's recommendation, we hired the staffer—essentially sight unseen. I knew if a budget analyst did a good job for Bob, she would do a good job for us," Hill recalls. "He was absolutely right."

Budget analysts trained by Lang have gone on to become cabinet secretaries and hold



SENATOR
MICHAEL ELLIS
WISCONSIN

other top jobs in state government.

Dan Clancy, for example, is now president of Wisconsin's 68,000-student Technical College System—a job Clancy's Fiscal Bureau experience helped him get.

Clancy recalls his 1979 lunch-hour job interview with Lang. "He immediately made me feel at home. I remembered that he offered me half of the sandwich he was eating at his desk.

"It was Bob's passion about what he and his staff were doing to help make the Leg-

islature perform its role and functions more effectively that convinced me" to take the job, Clancy says. "Those like me who worked for Bob for many years develop a deep allegiance to Bob, both personally and professionally, because he expressed that same loyalty to you."

CHECK OUT a video interview with Bob Lang conducted by Wisconsin Eye at www.ncsl.org/magazine. Also, visit the Legislative Fiscal Bureau at www.legis.state.wi.us/lfb