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**Lawmakers have spent nearly $77K so far on 2019 travel**

Wisconsin lawmakers in 2019 have used their office budgets for travel to Australia to attend a youth leadership conference, Denver for a hemp seminar and Nashville to witness Assembly Speaker Robin Vos become president of the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Meanwhile, others traveled on the dime of groups that sponsored their trips, including Rep. John Spiros’s visit to Greece for the World Hellenic Inter-Parliamentary Association Conference.

Records from the chief clerk’s offices show altogether lawmakers spent $76,905 from their taxpayer-funded office accounts to cover out-of-state travel between Jan. 1 and Aug. 30.

The most expensive trip covered via the office budgets was the $2,763 state Sen. Chris Larson, D-Milwaukee, spent as he traveled to Australia as part of a leadership conference for young lawmakers. Larson spent another $810 to travel to Washington, D.C., for a conference that was part of the pre-program for the Australian American Leadership Dialogue that later took him to Perth.

Larson said he was nominated and picked for the opportunity after he helped host a contingent of Australians in Wisconsin last year. He said the travel included meetings with other American elected officials and also gave him insight into how the trade war is impacting the farm economies of other countries like it has Wisconsin’s. He also served on a panel that discussed regional economies.

“It was a unique experience,” Larson said.

Larson also made a personal stop in New Zealand on his way home from the conference, paying his own way to fly from Australia to New Zealand before using his office account to cover the return trip to Milwaukee. Larson said it ended up being a cheaper option. The flight from New Zealand to Milwaukee was $702, while the flights that took him from Milwaukee to Los Angeles to Brisbane, Australia, and then Perth cost $1,173.

The most frequent destination listed in the records was the NCSL meeting in Nashville with 34 lawmakers receiving approval to attend the August Legislative Summit. Twenty-eight of them were Assembly Republicans.

It was during that event that Vos, R-Rochester, formally became president of the organization. Vos didn’t seek legislative approval for his travel expenses, because the NCSL picked up the costs, a spokeswoman for the speaker said.

The costs for those who traveled to NCSL ranged from the $625 that six lawmakers sought to the $2,614 by Sen. Luther Olsen, R-Ripon.

In the Senate, members have to be pre-approved for out-of-state travel. Beyond that, the only restriction is they have enough money in their office accounts to cover the costs, according to the chief clerk’s office. Every two years, senators receive $55,000 to cover everything from office supplies to communications with constituents and travel.

Meanwhile, members of the Assembly are allowed one out-of-state trip each year of the session with several restrictions on costs, according to the chamber’s travel policy. That includes up to $500 for airfare and up to $250 per night for a hotel stay. Any exceptions must be pre-approved by the speaker, and the costs come out of their office budget of $20,000 for the two-year session.

Seven Assembly members were approved for two trips between Jan. 1 and Aug. 30, according to the records. But only Rep. Dave Murphy, R-Greenville, received reimbursement for both. The other trips were listed either as at no cost to the state, or the member hadn’t sought reimbursement by the time the open records request was filled.

Along with going to NCSL, Murphy made a trip to Washington, D.C., for the president’s signing of an executive order supporting free speech in higher education. Vos asked Murphy, who chairs the Colleges and Universities Committee, to attend the event at the White House on behalf of the caucus and the state, which is why he was granted an exception to the one-trip rule, a spokesman for the speaker said.

Murphy joined Vos and GOP lawmakers in late summer to circulate legislation that would require the UW Board of Regents to create disciplinary measures for students and staff that engage in violent or disorderly conduct against a speaker on campus.

Under Assembly rules, members also can accept scholarships from nine pre-approved groups to cover costs such as the NCSL, the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council and the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators.

For other organizations offering scholarships to cover food, drink, lodging or transportation, members must get approval from the speaker to accept. That includes a requirement the member shows the scholarship is received “on behalf of the state of Wisconsin and primarily for the benefit of the state and not primarily for private benefit of the official or any other person,” according to the travel policy.

Some of those who took trips after accepting scholarships include: Rep. Romaine Quinn, R-Barron, traveling to Washington, D.C., for the Conservative Energy Forum; Rep. Katrina Shankland, D-Stevens Point, to Breckenridge, Colo., for the Clean Energy Legislative Academy; and Rep. Shae Sortwell, R-Two Rivers, to Memphis, Tenn., for the Hazlitt Policy Center Summer Strategy Summit.

Spiros, R-Marshfield, traveled to Athens to attend the three-day World Hellenic Inter-Parliamentary Association Conference. The group seeks to bring together legislators of Greek origin from around the world to build links with the nation’s own legislature and parliament.

Spiros’ office said he was selected because of his work on Greek issues and his contributions to the Greek community, along with heritage. His trip included a briefing from senior Greek defense officials.

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