At exit, Doyle touts protection of health care, education, environment

By Eric Lindquist
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After eight years as governor, Jim Doyle wishes he could report that the state of the state is rosy — the Wisconsin Badgers' upcoming Rose Bowl appearance notwithstanding — as he prepares to leave office.

But he recognizes that is not the case, a reality he blames on historic downturns in the national and international economies.

Still, Doyle, 65, told the Leader-Telegram editorial board Tuesday he is most proud that, despite the tough times, he was able to protect the things that matter most — health care, education and the environment — while laying the groundwork for economic growth.

"I wish I was leaving when the American economy was at its peak and just really humming along, but in many ways I think having to govern in tough times is a lot harder," the two-term Democrat said. "You've got to establish priorities much more clearly."
Doyle has been steadfast in support of education, beginning with his first budget address during tough budget times in February 2003, when he called education his top priority "because it points the way out of this crisis."

Doyle said Tuesday he considers it a major accomplishment, considering the weak national economy in the past decade, to be able to leave behind a strong education system in the state.

He cited a major expansion in kindergarten for 4-year-olds, an improvement in high school graduation rates, enrollment growth in the UW System and a surge in building projects at UW campuses across the state — including UW-Eau Claire, UW-Stout in Menomonie and UW-River Falls — as examples of how he has fulfilled his commitment to education.

"We have done very well in Wisconsin under very, very difficult circumstances," he said.

The same could be said regarding health care, Doyle said, noting that nearly 98 percent of all state residents have access to affordable health insurance.

"We have worked hard to make Wisconsin an absolute leader in health care," Doyle said, noting that only Massachusetts has a higher percentage of residents with health coverage.

When it comes to the environment, Doyle said he is pleased to be able to say he governed during a period when clean air standards were raised, major water cleanup efforts were advanced, more than 500,000 acres were protected through the Stewardship Program and the Great Lakes Compact was created to ensure the management and protection of the Great Lakes for future generations.

And despite the poor economy, Doyle maintained he has pursued policies, in particular those promoting a knowledge-based economy and the creation of green energy, that he believes will put Wisconsin in position to flourish as the economy gains strength.

Brian Westrate, chairman of the Eau Claire County Republican Party, acknowledged Doyle is justified in claiming he pursued the ideology he promised. But Westrate argued that approach exacerbated the negative effects of the national recession on the state economy.

"My response, and I think voters' response in the November election, is that liberal policies just don't work," he said. "People are desirous of a more conservative approach to the economy."

A more effective economic approach would have involved cutting spending and taxes and reducing regulation to create a climate more conducive to business investment and expansion, Westrate said,
echoing GOP themes from an election in which Republicans took control of both houses of the Legislature and the governor's office. Doyle did not seek re-election to a third term.

As for the most difficult thing he has had to deal with in office, Doyle didn't hesitate in pointing to his role as commander in chief of the Wisconsin National Guard during a period when most state units deployed to wars in Iraq, Afghanistan or both.

"The hardest times are going to those funerals where young men or women who have gone off to serve us (have been killed) and are now coming home," he said. "That's really been the hardest times, just great people who have done a lot for us."

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