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Wisconsin Business Council launched to address state's critical challenges

Merchants, manufacturers and financial leaders join forces to improve public policy, strengthen state's economic performance

MADISON – Recognizing that better jobs and a stronger economy are critical to Wisconsin's quality of life, numerous major business organizations have joined together to form the Wisconsin Business Council.

With leadership from companies including American Transmission Co., Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, AT&T Wisconsin, Commerce State Bank, Midwest Natural Gas, MillerCoors, Orion Energy Systems and Park Bank, the Wisconsin Business Council intends to work with citizens, elected officials and policy-makers. The goal? To develop a pro-business, pro-employment agenda that makes Wisconsin a better place to start a business, expand a corporation and find exceptional investment opportunities.

In the process, says Phil Prange, president and chief executive of the new Wisconsin Business Council, the state will become a better place to raise a family, get an education, recreate and retire.

“When we talk about how we can sustain our quality of life, we're really talking about the need to establish a better business climate — one that opens the door to opportunity, innovation and employment,” says Prange, who also owns consulting firm Gateway Ventures. “The Wisconsin Business Council was established because we believe there are mutually beneficial solutions to the challenges we face today. If the current economic downturn has made one thing clear, it's that a flourishing private sector is critical for family-supporting jobs and a robust tax base.”

Scott T. VanderSanden, chairman of the Wisconsin Business Council board and president of AT&T Wisconsin, says more must be done to energize and advance efforts that promote Wisconsin as a good place to live and do business.

“As the nation's economy begins to stabilize, smart businesses will be looking for opportunities to resume growth,” VanderSanden says. “We need to make sure Wisconsin's business climate and policies welcome new investment and encourage job creation. We need to send a strong signal that Wisconsin is a place where businesses can grow and prosper during the next business cycle and beyond.”

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Members of the council say the organization's optimistic outlook and proactive stance will lead to a constructive dialogue among elected officials, legislative leaders, policy experts and members of the general public. Ultimately, however, the council's private sector supporters will be looking for real results.

"Our future vitality requires a comprehensive strategy that recognizes the broad nature of our existing economic base and the unique strengths of our work force," says Jim Senty, a member of the Wisconsin Business Council's advisory board who is president of Midwest Natural Gas in La Crosse and chairman of Park Bank in Madison. "At the same time, we need to be realistic about areas where our performance needs improvement and devise effective strategies to achieve new levels of success."

Marc Marotta, a member of the Wisconsin Business Council's board of directors and former Doyle Administration Secretary, says Wisconsin has been fortunate with the diverse nature of its industries, ranging from manufacturing and agriculture to insurance, health care and retail. However, says Marotta, now a partner with the law firm of Foley and Lardner in Milwaukee, the state's work force lags the national average in the percentage of workers with advanced degrees. Wisconsin also falls below average in the number of workers employed in what the U.S. Department of Labor classifies as high-technology jobs.

"The Wisconsin Business Council wants to give voice to these issues, while engaging leaders throughout the state in an aggressive search for solutions," says Prange. "From our solid K-12 schools and higher education system to our technical colleges and apprentice training programs, we have many of the key building blocks in place. At the same time, it's clear more must be done to preserve these assets and establish a more vibrant business climate."

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