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News

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State's business leaders take nonpartisan approach

Wisconsin Business Council hopes to influence policy

As the recession kicked into high gear at the end of 2008, some of the state's business leaders believed more could be done at the state level to lessen its impact on Wisconsin.

That quickly led to the formation of the Wisconsin Business Council, which organizers say is a nonpartisan approach to influencing public policy. Group leaders say they are not a political lobbying group but instead want to serve more as a consultant to the state's policy makers. The Board of Directors includes Neal Verfuert, president and CEO of Orion Energy Systems in Manitowoc.

Some representatives of the WBC, including Scott VanderSanden, president of AT&T Wisconsin and chairman of WBC's board, Phillip Prange, president and chief executive officer of WBC, and Patrick Farley, an attorney with the law firm of Axley Brynelsen LLP in Brookfield, secretary and general counsel of WBC, recently visited with Gannett Wisconsin Media. Here's an excerpt from that conversation:

Q. What led to the formation of this organization?

A. Phillip: The whole world is dealing with a recession and it wasn't just affecting the business community. We started talking about this at the end of 2008. We felt we needed a new nonpartisan approach to reach out in a collaborative fashion not just to businesses but to the legislature and executive branches of government and to academia and the intellectual community in general to build a consensus to develop real solutions to problems facing all of us. From those solutions, we will determine policy that will improve the quality of life as well as the business climate in the state. That's the genesis of how we got going.

Q. If your plan is to influence policy, won't you have to officially declare yourself a lobbying organization?

A. Prange: We are not political. We do not intend to establish a political action committee. We will advocate. It's not our intent to influence political campaigns.

VanderSanden: What this organization brings is an opportunity to work across party lines and to work with groups who have not been invited to policy discussions in the past. It's our goal to add their thoughts to the framework to build policy that we feel will make Wisconsin a better place to do business and improve the overall quality of life.

We want to put a balance out there so at the end of the day, all sides feel they win enough to make everyone happy. I think we can do that with this bipartisan effort. Instead of forcing people to come to the table, we want them to come willingly and offer their thoughts. It's not our plan to just have board meetings and come up with an agenda.

We have an organization now that I think if we do our job well, ideally, I would hope policy makers would look to us for our thoughts and guidance when they have to make tough choices and not just turn to certain groups who they've always turned to.

Q. There are other business organizations such as Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce that also is working to improve the state's business climate. How are you different?

A. VanderSanden: We are going to try very hard to involve people in discussions who have not been invited to the table before. We think other people may have good ideas that would help improve the overall quality of life and business climate in the state. We believe WMC would be a complementary organization to us and we would be to them.

Prange: The state needs people pulling in the same direction right now. We have a great university system, good technical college system and an outstanding K-12 system. We have great things to build on, yet we are facing a tough economic climate. In order to get through that, we need to work together.

Farley: I think you have to have a broad look at the whole picture. The advantage of bringing business people together with the academic community and think tanks is you make the connections that we're all in this together. We're not just looking at one slice, but the whole pie. Our approach, we believe is that we want WMC and the National Federation of Independent Business at the table with us. We're stepping outside the silo and looking at it from a horizontal perspective.

Q. What are your immediate goals?

A. VanderSanden: There are four basic areas we feel need to be addressed: regulatory and tax, training and education, economic development and infrastructure. Within those four buckets, we have to look at what are the right ways to advance those four objectives while finding a balancing act for business and maintaining what is important to the people of Wisconsin. I think other groups are addressing one piece or another. If you pull the lever on taxes, for example, it shifts three or four other things and then other debates get ignored. We feel there is another way to approach things and do it right.

Q. So what do you tackle first?

A. VanderSanden: Right now, our goal is to make sure the public knows we're out there. Then we want to get a group of advisers together and sit down with them, pick their brains, and determine a couple areas of focus in the next six months to a year.

Prange: When you look at the economy, yes we need a nonpartisan approach to that. Now that we have the organization, we have to bring the people together. Then we have to determine how we will implement. Our hope is to have round tables, bring in leaders from the academic world and invite others to participate. We welcome change and want winning ideas to help move the state forward.

VanderSanden: We hope by the fall, we'll have a more defined agenda on what we will try to tackle first. We have several people on board now who are looking for an opportunity to have a voice in Wisconsin.

<http://www.greenbaypressgazette.com/article/20090718/GPG03/907180451/1247/State-s-business-leaders-take-nonpartisan-approach>