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News

By: Mark Pitsch, Wisconsin State Journal

New group seeks to broaden business advocacy in Wisconsin

MADISON — Some of Wisconsin's top business leaders have formed a statewide business group they say will offer comprehensive, bipartisan solutions to improve the state's business climate.

While members of the Wisconsin Business Council say the group isn't intended to be a counterweight to the powerful business lobby Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, they said it will seek to advance business interests beyond the lower taxes and less regulation message that has become WMC's mantra. The new group will take "a holistic approach to economic development," said Marc Marotta, a partner at the Foley and Lardner law firm and a member of the business council's board. "It's not focused on one or two areas that you read about a lot."

Jim Haney, WMC's president, said his group has its own broad-based agenda, Moving Wisconsin Forward, that has the support of its 3,500 members. It calls for improving schools and employment training, reforming liability laws and improving transportation infrastructure, in addition to lowering taxes and less regulation.

"To the extent they agree with us and can help us, that's great," Haney said.

State Rep. Robin Vos, R-Caledonia, called the new business council a "front group" for Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle that seeks to blunt the influence of WMC.

"For a big corporate contribution, you get a seat on the board and dinner with Doyle," said Vos. "If it's not pay to play, it sure smells that way."

Lee Sensenbrenner, a spokesman for Doyle, called Vos's comments "pretty ridiculous." Business council officials denied Tuesday that the group offered meetings with Doyle in exchange for donations.

Marotta is a former administration secretary for Doyle. Also helping form the new business council are Phil Prange and James Klauser, key aides to former Gov. Tommy Thompson, a Republican.

Scott VanderSanden, president of AT&T Wisconsin, is chairman of the new group. Other businesses represented on the board of directors include MillerCoors, American Transmission Company, Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, Orion Energy Systems, and Park Bank.

Organizers said the group's goal is to develop long-term policy solutions for lawmakers they hope will attract businesses, create jobs and improve the state's economy. It will complement existing business groups such as WMC, officials said.

The group will lobby the Legislature, but Prange said it won't get involved in political campaigns. That contrasts with WMC, which has spent millions of dollars in recent years to help elect conservative Supreme Court justices and Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen, a Republican.

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