

Date of coverage: July 24, 2009

Editorial

By Steve Jagler

A better way to promote the state's business climate

The Wisconsin Business Council (WBC) is a new organization formed to work with citizens and policy-makers to develop a pro-business, pro-employment agenda that makes Wisconsin a better place to start a business, expand a company and find exceptional investment opportunities.

You might think such an organization would be redundant. After all, isn't that the job of the Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC)?

In reality, the WMC has narrowed its agenda to fighting taxes, loosening regulations, spending millions of dollars to elect conservative politicians and serving as a counterweight to the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), otherwise known as the teachers union.

The WMC also has become the loudest critic of Wisconsin as a place to do business.

The direction of the WMC prompted some of its board members to abandon the organization in recent years and created the need for a new organization of business people devoted to developing and promoting the state's business climate from a quality-of-life perspective. Enter the WBC.

The WBC is off to an impressive start with an all-star board of directors: chairman

Scott VanderSanden, president, AT&T Wisconsin; secretary and general counsel Patrick Farley, partner, Axley Brynelson; Tom Cardella, Eastern Division president, MillerCoors; Joe Fazio, chief executive officer, Commerce State Bank; William Johnson Jr., president, Johnson Timber Corp.; Marc Marotta, partner, Foley and Lardner; Steve Martenet, president, Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield; Phillip Prange, president, Wisconsin Business Council; Mark Rose, CEO, Discover Mediaworks; Randy Satterfield, vice president, American Transmission Co.; Paul Senty, vice president, Park Bank (of Madison); Neal Verfuert, president, Orion Energy Systems; and Jim Villa, president, Commercial Association of Realtors Wisconsin (CARW).

And then check out the WBC's advisory board: Michael Cudahy, philanthropist and founder, Marquette Electronics; William Ryan Drew, executive director, Milwaukee County Research Park Corp.; William

"Butch" Johnson, CEO, Johnson Timber; James Klauser, retired senior vice president, Wisconsin Energy Corp.; Michael Knetter, dean, University of Wisconsin School of Business; Fred Lubber, CEO and chairman, Super Steel Products Corp.; and James Senty president, Midwest Natural Gas and chairman, Park Bank (of Madison).

I spoke with several members of the new WBC board who told me they were attracted to the nonpartisan mission of the organization to work in a holistic way to make Wisconsin a better place to do business, work and play. They do not believe Wisconsin's businesses can only thrive at the expense of its educational system, its workforce, its environment or its infrastructure. In fact, our businesses need those things to thrive.

The WBC board has some capable people from both the left (Marotta) and the right (Klauser and Prange) of the political spectrum, and some very bright people in between.

"What was most attractive to me was this was going to be a bipartisan effort," VanderSanden said.

"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," said Prange, who also owns the Gateway Ventures consulting firm.

"One thing that attracted us to the organization is that it is bipartisan and it supports businesses, but not to the detriment of the citizens of Wisconsin," Fazio said.

Understand, the WBC has some immediate detractors who have a vested interest in defending the status quo of the "us vs. them" mentality, including one Milwaukee radio host who already is calling on his listeners to boycott the businesses represented on the WBC board.

Whatever. It's time our for state to move on to the 21st century with some new ways of formulating and implementing public policy. Let's go forward, Wisconsin! For more information, visit www.wibusiness.org.

Steve Jagler is executive editor of BizTimes Milwaukee.

<http://www.biztimes.com/blogs/milwaukee-biz-blog/2009/7/24/a-better-way-to-promote-the-states-business-climate>