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News

By Mark Pitsch

New group seeks to broaden business advocacy

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 & Commerce, they said it will seek to advance business interests beyond the lower taxes and less regulation message that has become WMC's mantra.

"For some it seems to be all about taxes and regulation," said Marc Marotta, a partner at the Foley and Lardner law firm and a member of the business council's board. But the new group will take "a holistic approach to economic development. 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.

"We think we have a good plan," Haney said. "To the extent they agree with us and can help us, that's great."

Rep. Robin Vos, R-Caledonia, called the new council a "front group" for Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle that seeks to blunt the influence of WMC. He also alleged that corporate donors to the group will get special access to Doyle and other Democrats.

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

Lee Sensenbrenner, a spokesman for Doyle, called Vos's comments "pretty ridiculous." Council officials denied that the group was offering meetings with Doyle in exchange for donations.

Marotta is a former administration secretary for Democratic Gov. Jim 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 Co., Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, Orion Energy Systems and Park Bank.

Organizers said the goal of the group 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 like WMC, officials said.

"We'd like to really try to work collaboratively with not only the businesses, but to try and do it in a way that policymakers understand and are receptive to our ideas," VanderSanden 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.

The group will focus on four policy areas: Economic development; education and workforce development; infrastructure; and taxes and regulation.

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