

Wisconsin Job Climate Can Do Better

By County Executive Scott Walker

Wisconsin lost 17,800 jobs during the past 12 months according to a recent report from the state Department of Workforce Development. A year ago, job growth was only 0.28% in the state (and 58% of the jobs created were in government). In 2007, Forbes Magazine listed Wisconsin as the 44th best place in the country to do business (down from 39th last year).

And recent decisions by General Motors and MillerCoors makes it clear that we must be aggressive to protect jobs in this state and to be ready to create good jobs to replace those no longer here. Years ago, when a manufacturer moved 500 jobs out of our area, we were already working with GE Healthcare to bring 2,000 jobs into the county. Once again, we must be ahead of the curve in Wisconsin.

With this in mind, I challenge our state leaders to do more to improve the business climate in the Badger State. We need an aggressive plan to grow jobs:

Reduce the cost of doing business: Government must hold the line on taxes at the state and local level. In September, I will introduce my 7th straight budget without a tax levy increase. We did it through controlling spending and through innovations.

Reducing costs also means controlling litigation. Manufacturers should be protected from lawsuits related to products they never made and farmers should be protected from nuisance lawsuits. Medical professionals should also be protected against unreasonable lawsuit abuse.

It also means addressing the high costs of healthcare. The last thing we need is a government driven system that drives up payroll taxes. A better solution is to provide incentives for market driven solutions that actually control costs instead of shifting them to employers and taxpayers.

Better prepare people for jobs: We need an education system that understands the workplace and it preparing students for the jobs of the future. Failing systems need to be replaced with new ideas that focus on the fundamentals needed to be successful in the workplace.

Technical schools need to focus on specific career development and stop trying to duplicate the programs offered by 4-year degree programs. Greater attention needs to be given to engineering, science and math in our colleges and universities. Future investments from the state should be driven by benchmarks for job creation.

Control the bureaucracy: Many state agencies – like the Department of Natural Resources, Department of Revenue and Department of Transportation – are out of control. They have a culture of obstruction and not of customer service.

Deadlines should be set for every permit and refunds provided for cost of delays. I want to prevent departments from reinterpreting current laws and rules. Government should be there to serve the people and not the other way around.

Streamline incentive programs for expanding and new businesses: The state should consolidate the more than 150 different economic development programs in the state and put them into a new, one-stop Job Opportunity Bureau (JOB) within the Department of Commerce. We did this successfully with long-term care in our county through Familycare and it can be done for economic development too.

Renew a public/private partnership to recruit jobs to Wisconsin: Our state needs a coordinated effort to get new businesses to create jobs and existing businesses to expand jobs in Wisconsin. The Governor needs to be the number one cheerleader for business growth and development. In the past, we saw too many opportunities – like Menard’s or Ashley Furniture – slip away. It is time we are all on the same page promoting economic growth.

Invest in our infrastructure: A strong economy requires a great transportation system and reliable energy sources. The state must act to protect raids against the Transportation Fund like the billion dollars removed by Governor Doyle in previous budgets. If we want reliable and safe roads, bridges and other transportation infrastructure, we need to have a strong transportation fund.

The state must do more to increase our energy options. That means all sources – from electrical to cleaning burning coal to alternative fuels to wind power to nuclear energy. Wisconsin employers need power for the future.

Recently, I was at the grand opening of a major expansion at Bucyrus International in South Milwaukee. Companies like Northwestern Mutual and Johnson Controls continue to be strong. Despite our challenges, I know that we can do better in Wisconsin.

Moving up in the rankings of that are business friendly will take some real work by our civic and government leaders. An effective strategy means more than just press conferences with grant checks, it means creating an environment in Wisconsin that welcomes those who want to put people to work.