

Job woes the topic of roundtable

By Giles Morris
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A number of Wisconsin state legislators gathered in Rhinelander on Monday morning to hear what local businesses need from the state in order to preserve jobs. The roundtable event was a part of a series of meetings designed to gather feedback that will be included in a report with recommendations to be submitted to the legislature some time this summer.

Rep. Rich Zipperer (R-Pewaukee), the ranking Assembly member on the Wisconsin Jobs Now Task Force, said the roundtables were a way to open ears in Madison to the concerns of the people responsible for creating and preserving jobs.

"We've come here because we were concerned that the businesses employing the real people in Wisconsin weren't being heard in Madison and they're the ones out here trying to survive in this economy," Zipperer said.

The task force has already held four roundtables across the state and Zipperer said he has heard from employers that the state needs to tax businesses less and work to create a better trained workforce in targeted industries.

Zipperer said the meetings will continue through the end of the month at which time the responses will be organized into a report with recommendations as soon as possible, hopefully in time to influence the state's budget debate.

"The number one message coming of this meeting is that the time to voice your opinions is now," Zipperer said.

Rep. Jeff Mursau (R-Crivitz), Sen. Jim Holperin (D-Eagle River), and Rep. Dan Meyer (R-Eagle River) also attended the round table discussion. The employers attending the event represented small businesses and big industries alike.

"Small businesses can't take these tax increases when we're not making it now," said Russ Yaeger, owner of Yaeger Oil in Laona.

Yaeger said his company's revenue was down 30 percent in 2008.

He made an impassioned plea to the legislators at the table.

"Nobody knows what's going on out here. Dammit get out and see the people. Exactly what you're doing right now," Yaeger said.

Brian Kief, Northern Region CEO of Ministry Health Care, came to the table to ask for better training initiatives and increased access to higher education for the region to help offset shortages of physicians, registered nurses, and skilled technicians in the medical services field.

"It's our experience in health care that people who train in the state, stay in the state. Even if they came from out of the state for the training program," Kief said. "And that can be said of the region too. If they train in the region they stay in the region."

Rick Wilson of Pukall Lumber in Arbor Vitae, a saw mill that employs 75 people, asked the legislators to help the region's forest products industry.

"Our industry has seen reduced demand for our products and unprecedented low prices," Pukall said. "What I'm concerned about is how the state can continue to support the forest products industry."

The round table provided a venue for open discussion between small and large business leaders and their legislators, but the variety of concerns expressed at the meeting could not be boiled down into one message.

Meyer, who acted as a kind of host to the participants assembled at the Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association building, said he was most concerned about tax increases that would impact businesses and could lead to more job losses.

"You know how I feel. With the recession and the economy we're in, this is the worst time to raise taxes on businesses," Meyer said.



State representatives Jeff Mursau, Rich Zipperer and Dan Meyer were part of a roundtable on jobs Monday in Rhinelander.
Giles Morris/Daily News