



Jobs Cabinet aims to align worker skills, company needs

By James Paton

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Gov. Bill Ritter's new jobs Cabinet comes at an important time, as many believe the U.S. economy is on the cusp of a recession, if it is not in one already.

The goal of the group is to unite the education, business and workforce development spheres to keep the state's economy competitive. Ensuring that Coloradans have what it takes to fill good jobs in key sectors and encouraging businesses to stay or relocate here are atop the agenda.

"What is this all about?" said Jim Lyons, a Denver lawyer and one of the Cabinet's co-chairs. "The short, simplistic answer is there are separate tracks being pursued right now in our state for economic improvement, and our job is to get all three tracks to the same intersection."

The group, whose aim is to align the skills of workers with the needs of companies, will have 35 to 40 members, led by Lyons, Qwest executive Teresa Taylor and Trinidad State Junior College President Ruth Ann Woods.

Four Ritter administration officials - the directors of the departments of economic development, labor, education and local affairs - plan to assist.

The governor, who has discussed the Cabinet for months, announced the co-chairs in his State of the State address last week. Their first meeting together is set for April.

Many economists forecast moderate but slower growth in Colorado this year but still better than the nation as a whole. Colorado will be tested with the rest of the country, however, amid concerns about the housing market and consumer spending.

A recent study released by the Metro Denver Economic Development Corp. also expressed worries about the state's advantage eroding, partly because of a lack of sufficient investment in education and transportation.

Taylor, Qwest's chief administrative officer, said the Cabinet will focus on a long-term plan rather than a short-term approach to navigating what could be a difficult economy in the months ahead. She said education is the biggest challenge.

"There isn't any magic formula," she said. "It can feel overwhelming, but we feel optimistic that we can break it down into pieces we can take action on."

Woods, the junior college president, approached Ritter at the Colorado State Fair in Pueblo, excited to tell him about a new program to train students for jobs in the booming oil and gas sector so businesses could hire local workers instead of looking elsewhere.

"I think our job in this Cabinet is to identify gaps between business needs and skills," she said. "That's going to be huge."

Lyons traveled a lot to Northern Ireland in the 1990s, dispatched by President Clinton to work on economic initiatives.

"Colorado ain't Belfast," Lyons said, but added that he plans to adopt a similar approach, getting out of Denver frequently to visit other parts of the state.

"I'm a firm believer, as a result of that experience, in grass-roots, street-level-based, bottom-up decision-making for economic

development," he said.

Lyons, who also helped lead Ritter's transition effort, said renewable energy will be a hot topic.

"We have an opportunity to make Colorado the Silicon Valley of renewable energy," he said. "We're uniquely positioned to do that. It would be a real opportunity missed not to develop that to the greatest extent we can and to make sure we have people who are educated for that and are meeting the needs of business."

patonj@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-2544

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