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Group forms plan to plug brain drain

State urged to build economy, attract talent

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A state consortium of farm, labor, business and education groups has come up with a "Competitive Mandate for Wisconsin" seeking an economic development strategy that emphasizes education and builds on state assets to cultivate more high-paying jobs.

The plan, which could take up to 20 years to accomplish, offers a vision for economic development that prioritizes education, taxes, health care, entrepreneurship, worker training, infrastructure and marketing.

Competitive Wisconsin Inc., a non-partisan group formed in 1981, figures it would cost the state \$756.6 million to initially implement recommendations that it expects to result in \$22 billion a year in higher incomes, leading to \$1.32 billion a year in additional income taxes.

On an ongoing basis, the plan would have a net impact of more than \$1 billion of additional revenue, which the group said would be available for priority programs and property tax relief.

"We're trying to incorporate some new strategies, such as going after brain power versus chasing smokestacks," said Bill McCoshen, executive director of Competitive Wisconsin and former state commerce secretary under Gov. Tommy G. Thompson.

Competitive Wisconsin developed the 30-page mandate after a year and a half of reviewing various research from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance and the Wisconsin Alumni Association. The group also studied comparative advantages in Minnesota's economy and sought insights from policy changes Minnesota made in the 1980s under Gov. Rudy Perpich.

Competitive Wisconsin says its primary target is to raise Wisconsin's per-capita income, which now trails Minnesota's \$37,322 by \$4,071. That difference would create the extra \$22 billion in personal income in Wisconsin.

High-income haven

By making Wisconsin more of a haven and hotbed for high incomes, the group would hope to expand the state's tax base, thus lowering the tax burden per resident - an oft-cited disadvantage of Wisconsin's business climate.

"We must recruit and develop high wage earners and make strategic investments of taxpayer resources to grow our economy and create jobs," Tom O'Neill, president of Competitive Wisconsin, said in a statement. O'Neill is senior vice president of Marshall & Ilsley Corp.

McCoshen said Competitive Wisconsin would be a catalyst for public policies that would improve the state's economy by competing better for high-paying jobs.

Among the consortium's recommendations:

- Fostering the retention, expansion and increased productivity of existing Wisconsin farms and businesses.
- Nurturing entrepreneurialism by accelerating business start-ups, increasing research and development, and encouraging technology transfer.
- Promoting the state's quality of life to recruit high-wage workers ages 30 to 50 looking for a place to raise their families.
- Advocating fiscal restraint in state spending while strategically shifting public and private investments in economic development.
- Prioritizing investments in K-12 education, technical education, higher education, infrastructure, health care and worker training.

The broad base of Competitive Wisconsin's membership should help the group build support

for its mandate, McCoshen said.

"I think it gives us a running head start in the Capitol on the policy changes because you won't have union fighting business or agriculture fighting business or education kind of sitting on the sidelines. We're all in this together," McCoshen said. "We understand that each of us plays a key role in the statewide development plan, and we're all going to push in the same direction."

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