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Business leaders cite critical needs

By Denis Collins

Mayor Dave Cieslewicz is hosting a series of listening sessions to get input on how to guide Madison's economic development in response to population and job growth.

In October 2007, Edgewood College Business School students surveyed local businesses about their views on three labor supply issues: Quality of high school graduates, Latino immigrants as an employment source and commuter rail. These topics were selected after the students attended talks given by several city and business leaders about issues facing local businesses.

A 12-question survey addressing these issues was e-mailed to 1,139 members of the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce. After several follow-up e-mails, 166 businesses confidentially responded, providing a very reasonable 14.6 percent reply rate. The responses, summarized below, should give the mayor food for thought.

Quality of graduates

While high school graduates fill many job openings in the Dane County area, only 39 percent of the respondents reported that current high school graduates are prepared for the workforce. More than half believed that graduates lacked adequate communication and mathematical skills. Given the schools' annual budget problems, one possible solution is for businesses to pay a separate tax to provide additional funding of the public school system. Only 15 percent of the respondents would support such a solution.

Latino immigrants as an employment source

Latinos are one of the fastest growing ethnic populations in the city. Madison, one of the nation's most livable cities, provides Latino immigrants an opportunity to share in the American dream.

One-third of the survey respondents employ Latinos. Forty-two percent of all respondents believed that Latinos should be actively recruited to meet Madison's workforce needs. Madison is also a temporary home to some undocumented Latino immigrants. Only 31 percent of the respondents believed this group should be given access to health care, although 63 percent responded that they should be given a special path to citizenship.

Commuter rail

Commuter rail is often presented as a solution for easing traffic congestion associated with urban sprawl. But only one-third of the respondents believed urban sprawl or traffic congestion was hampering economic development, and only 22 percent reported that their business would benefit from a commuter rail line running from the suburbs to downtown Madison. In addition, only 26

percent claimed commuter rail would provide their businesses with access to a greater pool of employees, and only 33 percent thought it would attract more businesses to Dane County.

Based on these survey findings, Mayor Dave would be well-advised to go back to basics by rolling out the welcome mat for Latino immigrants and making sure that the public school system has the resources for graduates to become productive employees. As for commuter rail -- keep it on the back burner or provide the leadership necessary to educate business about its need.

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