

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED BY COMMITTEE CONSULTANTS FOLLOWING COMPLETION OF BUSINESS CLIMATE STUDY FOCUS GROUPS

BACKGROUND

As part of the business climate study, the Legislative Council's interim Economic Development Committee, in compliance with Section 17 of 2005 Senate Bill No. 2032, distributed surveys and conducted six focus groups across the state. Following completion of the surveys and six focus groups, the committee consultants reviewed the information gathered and identified five key issues.

In addition to identifying the key issues, the committee consultants drafted a brief summary intended to put each issue into context and posed questions intended to help the state agencies provide state action items addressing each issue.

KEY ISSUES

Workforce

The advance surveys revealed the number one issue of respondents was workforce availability and development. The compilation of data from the focus groups reiterated that message.

Workforce availability at all skill levels was a concern, but shortages in the trades was more frequently mentioned. The quality and work ethic of North Dakota's workforce was praised, but the need for a larger workforce was consistently cited as a constraint upon business development in North Dakota.

Please make suggestions as to what kinds of changes could be made to expand the supply of qualified workforce in North Dakota, with attention to the trades as well as highly skilled workers. This could take the form of modifying or expanding existing programs, adding new programs, and taking wholly new approaches to the issue.

Attracting and Retaining Young People

Attracting businesses and people to the state--especially young people--was a major theme of the focus groups. Furthermore, our need to retain our young people, or at least to encourage them to return to North Dakota at some point in their careers, was mentioned as an important priority for strengthening our economy.

Please make suggestions as to ways in which we can make the state more attractive to young people, be they native North Dakotans or "new recruits." This could take a variety of forms, in terms of enhancing existing programs, providing incentives, or wholly new approaches. Please confine your suggestions to activities that are within the control of state government.

Image of North Dakota

Again the state's image was a top priority on the advance surveys. In the focus groups it was felt that both internal and external negative image was a problem. Finding ways to promote North Dakota's positives and promoting it early in our young people was considered important.

What more can we do to reinforce the strengths of North Dakota, both with our existing population and businesses and with workers, businesses, and tourists from other places who might consider coming here? Clearly, we have marketing programs in place but is there more that can be done? Don't hesitate to "think outside the box" on this perennial challenge.

Transportation

High cost and low availability of transportation for both goods and people are concerns. Inadequate rail and air service were commonly cited as constraints on our economy.

What more can be done to expand the accessibility of viable transportation to help North Dakota businesses get goods to market and to make North Dakota more available to businesses and travelers who might come here?

Universities

An opportunity that was frequently cited by participants was facilitating more direct involvement by our fine university system in economic development. The universities are considered a vital resource, but the general feeling was that a variety of factors worked against utilizing them to their maximum potential as economic development partners.

What techniques, changes, or approaches might be taken to more fully involve and utilize our universities as partners in economic development?