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Wisconsin Way Initiative Releases Blueprint for Change

Comprehensive plan features tax fairness and economic development initiatives to stimulate growth and reduce property tax burden

MADISON – With the help of more than 6,000 state residents, a group of Wisconsin’s most influential business, labor and policy organizations have joined forces to release a comprehensive plan to improve the fairness of Wisconsin’s tax system while preserving the quality of public services.

The Wisconsin Way Blueprint for Change caps more than two years of survey research, dozens of public town hall forums, expert advisory panels and an exhaustive review of previous work by high-level commissions and policy groups. In releasing the blueprint, leaders of the Wisconsin Way effort are seeking to further focus and refine this unique public conversation about Wisconsin’s future and secure additional comments and feedback in preparation for discussions with policy makers about possible implementation strategies.

“The people of this state strongly believe Wisconsin needs a comprehensive plan to overcome its challenges — a plan that goes beyond short-term solutions to address underlying issues of tax fairness, economic development and effective government service delivery,” said Mark O’Connell, executive director of the Wisconsin Counties Association and a founder of the Wisconsin Way effort. “The Wisconsin Way Blueprint for Change achieves this far-reaching vision and casts a bold vote of confidence in the future.”

The Blueprint for Change represents a collaborative effort by members of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, Wisconsin REALTORS® Association, Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association, the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Counties Association, Wisconsin League of Municipalities and Wood Communications Group to create positive momentum for the state. Since its inception, the Wisconsin Way has also received funding from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the Wisconsin Professional Firefighters Association, the Wisconsin School District Administrators Association and the American Transmission Company.

Working with input from other organizations, including the Wisconsin Coalition of Aging Groups, the Wisconsin Alliance of Cities, the Wisconsin Economic Development Association and Competitive Wisconsin, sponsors of the Wisconsin Way effort have spent 18 months engaging residents throughout the state in a search for realistic solutions to Wisconsin’s outdated tax structure. Through 28 town hall meetings and approximately 100 organizational briefings, more than 6,000 people had an opportunity to share their concerns and ideas. The process generated some 800 pages of comments about what Wisconsin needs to do to move forward.

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The results can be found in the Blueprint for Change, a document that addresses tax reform and modernization; spending reform and improved government service delivery; economic development; and interim steps to address the immediate budget gaps.

Dan Burkhalter, executive director of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, said the Blueprint contains some elements that may be challenging for different constituencies to embrace at first blush. However, Burkhalter stressed, the Wisconsin Way Blueprint represents a comprehensive effort and its initiatives are designed to work in concert to achieve benefits for all.

“When the Wisconsin Way partners started this process, we all recognized the need to put everything on the table in order to achieve the comprehensive and ground-breaking changes that are needed. There were no sacred cows,” Burkhalter said. “We would urge citizens, policy makers and others eager for reform to view these initiatives in that light — as an integrated package — rather than a series of stand-alone ideas.”

Pat Goss, executive director of the Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association, said the challenges facing the state call for urgent action. In areas ranging from infrastructure and education to health care and public safety, Wisconsin needs a coherent plan.

Rick Chandler, former state budget director and a member of Wisconsin Way’s advisory panel, said the blueprint contains significant examples of “outside-the-box” thinking, but also borrows from proven best practices of other states and government entities.

“For decades, Wisconsin’s tax structure has been over-reliant on the property tax to fund government services,” Chandler said. “Today, the very real fiscal crisis facing state and local government means doing nothing is no longer an option. The Wisconsin Way Blueprint for Change can succeed where others have failed because of its comprehensive nature.”

Jim Wood, president of Wood Communications Group, praised the efforts of citizens throughout the state to become involved in the process and engage in the search for solutions. Although discussions among the Wisconsin Way organizers at times became contentious, the leaders recognized that partisan rhetoric does not create lasting solutions.

“In developing the blueprint, we had to allow the priorities of the public to guide our work,” said Mike Theo, vice president for legal and public affairs with the Wisconsin REALTORS® Association. “At the end of the day, we all recognized that the greater good would only be achieved by putting aside our individual interests and working towards the principles of a system that is public, inclusive, fair, innovative and effective.”

For more information about the project, state residents are encouraged to visit the Web site, www.WisconsinWay.org. Citizens may use the Web site to register and provide additional comments and feedback and are encouraged to attend upcoming half-day forums on specific aspects of the blueprint; registration and more information also is available by calling (800) 919-3012 or by e-mail at wisconsinway@wcgpr.com.