

# P MONTANA CHAMBER'S PROSPERITY PLAN

*Building Long-Term, Sustainable Growth*

## A Plan To Create Opportunity For All Montanans Energy, Health Care, Taxes, Housing Among Targeted Issues

**T**he Montana Prosperity Plan is the Montana Chamber's roadmap for *long-term, sustainable growth* of Montana's economy. The plan incorporates a number of pro-active ideas that will hopefully be embraced by lawmakers in Helena during the 2009 Legislative Session. In this plan, there are a number of priorities to keep Montana competitive with the rest of the nation, and even a few that could put us ahead of the pack when it comes to attracting new businesses to the state.



### Energy Solutions

Montana is nicknamed "The Treasure State" due to its rich natural wealth and unmatched beauty. These treasures present tremendous opportunities as well as many responsibilities.

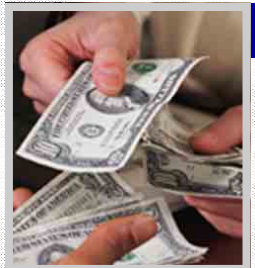
A major portion of Montana's natural resource treasure is energy. Montana has the largest coal reserves in the country. Oil & gas development has been a big economic driver in Eastern Montana. The state has also started to develop new additional energy resources like wind, biodiesel, solar and more. If Montana is going to be part of the solution to America's energy independence, we must encourage the development of *all* of our energy resources. We will vigilantly push for ideas supporting the development of all Montana's natural resources to create good-paying jobs, increase energy supply, increase conservation measures, and decrease dependence on foreign supplies of energy. Montana must do more in the energy arena.



### Affordable and Quality Health Care

Health care lags just behind energy on the list of the top financial concerns for Montanans. The rising cost of health insurance prevents many small businesses from offering health insurance coverage. An estimated 160,000 Montanans have no health insurance at all. The cost shifting associated with providing services to people without insurance continues to drive the price of health insurance up for those who have coverage.

Too often we hear that we must choose between the status quo and a complete government takeover of the health care system. Washington, DC and Helena need to think about more creative solutions to the health care crisis. While many of the health care problems lie at the federal level, Montana lawmakers can still get behind pro-active ideas to get more people covered and reform our health care system, including health information technology, consumer awareness, and small business health insurance pooling.



### Tax Relief and Simplification

In the past few years, Helena has seen some big battles over the future of Montana's tax system. On one hand, zealous Helena bureaucrats are anxious to crack down on tax cheaters. On the other hand, Montana business groups and taxpayers have warned against making changes that further complicate our tax code and hurt honest businesses and our economy in the process.

The one solution that will target the concerns of both groups is a simplification of our tax code. If our tax system is easier to implement, it will take fewer government auditors to administer and allow more time for state employees to pursue the true bad actors who are not paying their fair share. Additionally, Montana families and small businesses will benefit when they are able to better understand this convoluted area of taxation. Efforts will also be undertaken to reduce burdensome, anti-growth taxes, such as the business equipment tax.



## Affordable Workforce Housing

As real estate prices rise, more and more Montana working families are being squeezed out of the dream of owning their own home. At the same time, businesses are having difficulties attracting new workers to their communities due to a lack of affordable workforce housing. In some parts of the state, housing is simply not available.

In order to bring positive change for Montana businesses and working families, the business community is willing to work closely with local governments, state government, the federal government, and other groups who are interested in affordable workforce housing. In the next legislative session, the business community will explore pro-active reforms that will help Montana working families become home owners, including the creation of a state affordable housing fund, increased investments in local infrastructure & transportation, and decreased costly government regulation on new developments.



## Quality Education

We should be proud that our K-12 students in Montana outperform their peers in most other states. Montana also has some of the finest universities in the country. We must continue to strive for excellence in education through high standards and adequate funding levels.

But new investments in education are dependent on a healthy, growing economy. Education funding comes from taxpayers and businesses. In order to increase education funding, we must also increase business activity and development. In short, being pro-education means being pro-growth and pro-business.

Much more can also be done to make sure that our students are learning the basic skills to compete on the current global arena. Balancing high goal and standards with increased funding levels that meet constitutional requirements is essential. Investments in higher education, especially the two-year trade schools, and workforce training also help keep Montana competitive.



## Legal Reform

In study after study, Montana is shown to have problems with lawsuit abuse, an unpredictable legal climate and judges who are too often elected with money from personal injury lawyers. A healthy economy depends on a predictable legal system that adheres to the laws passed by the legislature.

We will pursue reforms in the next legislature that will restore judicial independence, reduce outrageous employment lawsuits and reform our courts in general. Montanans don't like the idea of having the deck stacked against them before they set foot in a courtroom, so every effort should be made to ensure everyone has a fair shake in the Montana judicial system.



## Workers' Compensation

According to a national study, Montana has the fifth highest worker's compensation premiums in the country. In comparison, our neighbors in the Rocky Mountain West have some of the cheapest premiums, creating a huge disincentive for businesses to locate in our state.

According to a recent independent study of our worker's compensation system, there are a variety of differences that stand out when compared with other states. Currently, Montana is far behind the national average when it comes to claim settlements. We also have an accident rate that is higher than the national average. That is simply unacceptable, and changes must be made to emphasis safety in the workplace.

In addition, the Montana judicial system has been very generous in its interpretation of work comp law, thus allowing people to collect work comp benefits for injuries that were outside the scope of employment. The Legislature should tighten up those requirements, which will allow for benefits to go to employees who are injured while on the job.



## Government Reform

While government usually has very good intentions for what it tries to accomplish, it often lags behind the private sector in creativity, efficiency and effectiveness. In order to help state government be a more helpful, resourceful partner for both the public and businesses, we have included a few needed good government reforms as part of the Montana Prosperity Plan.

State and local government officials should be required to disclose their lobbying expenditures to members of the public who pay the taxes used to fund these lobbying efforts. Also, Helena should clamp down on the number of bills introduced during one session in order to give adequate time to the most important duties it's tasked with during the 90-day period. Finally, the legislature should look at sending a common sense term limit referendum to the people that would enhance the stature of the legislative branch.