

Contact: Alexa Heffernan
Iowa Business Council
100 E. Grand Ave., Suite 160
Des Moines, IA 50309
Phone: 515-246-1700
Fax: 515-246-1701
ibc@iowabusinesscouncil.com

Iowa Business Council

OPINION

November 15, 2004

The Iowa Business Council, a catalyst for change – taking ideas to action

By John Forsyth, Chair, Iowa Business Council
Chairman and CEO, Wellmark Blue Cross Blue Shield of Iowa

In 1985 at the height of Iowa's economic downturn, the Iowa Business Council was formed to assist the state's leaders develop strategies for economic recovery and growth. The role and activities of the Iowa Business Council have evolved over time. Our focus has moved from conducting research, analyzing results and advising policymakers, to a broader role of advocacy and leadership.

Comprised of the top executives of 24 of Iowa's largest employers from across the state including the three Regent university presidents, our members put aside the personal interests of the companies and institutions they lead to come together on issues to advance the Iowa economy. The non-partisan Council is solely supported by the contributions of its members.

The Council addresses long-term statewide issues fundamental to fostering a strong economy and healthy business climate. While other organizations focus on individual bills, the Council, in keeping with our desire to remain non-partisan, stays focused on the "big-picture." For example, we were an early endorser of the concept of the Iowa Values Fund, and we continue to feel strongly that the fund should be reinstated and permanently funded, because it is an important mechanism to encourage and support Iowa's economic comparative strengths in advanced manufacturing, life sciences and information solutions. Those strengths were outlined by the Council in 2001 in "A Case for Change," a white paper focused on Iowa's past, present and future, illustrating how the state's economy had transitioned away from its dependence on agriculture. The white paper included recommendations on what needed to be done to move Iowa's economy forward.

In 2002, we acknowledged the numerous good ideas offered by other groups and organizations to improve Iowa's economy, including the Governor's Strategic Planning Council's Iowa 2010 plan, but suggested that a mechanism to convert those ideas into reality was missing. We recognize that government cannot and should not fix all our problems, nor can any single business, educational institution, government agency or organization. However, by working together in a collaborative manner, positive and meaningful results will happen. Along with the support of the Iowa Chamber Alliance, the Iowa Business Council formed and launched the Iowa Coalition for Innovation and Growth, a framework wherein people of like minds can come together and coalesce around strategic economic initiatives – moving them from theory to action. Self-directed, action and results oriented "hot" teams, made up of leaders in business, industry, education and government, were formed. Results to date include:

- A cradle to grave strategic plan “to establish Iowa as a preferred headquarters location for companies specializing in production, support and services for biotechnology-based protein products.”
- An advanced manufacturing research and collaboration cluster, with the mission “to promote the use of advanced technologies, engineering and processes; conduct collaborative research; and provide user-to-user sharing of technologies and best practices in Iowa.” Its goal is to make Iowa the leader in engineering and advanced manufacturing. Projects to date include the introduction of rapid prototyping to Iowa’s manufacturers, dramatically decreasing the time to market for product development; collaborative research to develop biomass products to replace fiberglass; and the creation of communities of practice for engineers (www.amrcc.com).
- An entrepreneurial formation team with the goal to grow and develop the community of entrepreneurial practice needed to sustain growth and innovation in Iowa. Their first task was to create a Web site to provide a one-stop resource for Iowa’s entrepreneurs and investors (www.iowaentrepreneur.com).
- Another team focused on introducing business process improvement tools to state government to improve the ease of doing business with government agencies. The first project was to reduce the time it takes to obtain an air quality permit. By eliminating “waste” in the process, a 93% reduction in time from application to permit was achieved. This same tool, Lean Enterprise, is now being deployed in other areas of state government.
- A cross-functional team representing employers, health care providers and insurers recently was formed to introduce Lean Enterprise to the health care community. Initial results are very encouraging.

I look forward to 2005 and beyond as the Council continues to focus on areas in which it can act as a catalyst to improve the long-term economic vitality of our state.

Iowa Business Council members in the corridor include Clay Jones, Chairman, President and CEO, Rockwell Collins, Inc.; Tom Aller, President, Interstate Power and Light/Alliant Energy Corporation; Chris Davis, Chairman and CEO, McLeodUSA; David Skorton, Ph.D., M.D., President, University of Iowa; and, Donna Katen-Bahensky, Director and CEO, University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics.

For a complete list of the Iowa Business Council members go to www.iowabusinesscouncil.com.