

INSIDE WISCONSIN

Tom Still Column No. 67-03

“Wisconsin Economic Summit aims for a new lease on life”

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (10-5-03)

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MADISON – Has the Wisconsin Economic Summit run its course? With Summit IV just a few weeks away, that’s a question that skeptics and supporters alike will ask about the University of Wisconsin System’s two-day short course on the state’s economy.

The best answer, to be fair, is “wait-and-see.” If the fourth economic summit in Milwaukee serves as a reminder of what has been accomplished over the past three years and points the way to continued progress, then it will be a success. If it ignores important initiatives already underway and dwells on problems rather than solutions, Summit IV will likely be the last. Judging by the agenda, the former scenario is more likely than the latter.

Scheduled for Oct. 27-28 in Milwaukee’s Midwest Airlines Center, the summit begins with a series of workshops that underscore some of the important work that’s been done since the first summit in the fall of 2000.

Updates on regional economic cooperation, encouraging entrepreneurs, building public-private partnerships, transferring technology to the marketplace, investing in worker training, securing investment capital, combating the so-called “brain drain” and renewing manufacturing are among the topics. All were identified as problems by past summits. In total, two-dozen workshops will run over four rounds from 12:30 to 6:15 p.m. Monday, Oct. 27.

Tuesday’s plenary session will feature three headliner panels on health care, regional economic development and industry “clusters.”

Health care costs have been a drag on the national and state economies for years, with employers and workers alike coping with double-digit increase in premiums. Some experts say the worst is over and a combination of cost controls and quality enhancements are finally in place. They better be right, because advocates of a “single-payer” government-dominated system are waiting in the wings.

At last year’s summit, a panel of veteran state budget-watchers offered their recommendations for balancing Wisconsin’s budget deficit. Those recommendations were largely bypassed in favor of other strategies, but the exercise called attention to the size and scope of the problem. Perhaps this year’s health care panel will do the same.

The challenge with the regional economic development and industry cluster reports will be to demonstrate that one approach does not work against the other. There's no doubt that Wisconsin has a number of regional economies – the Chippewa Valley, the Fox Valley, Milwaukee Metro, Dane County and Racine-Kenosha, to cite a few prominent examples. There's also reason to think those regions are doing a better job of working together. But is a regional development strategy consistent with counting on “clusters” to work together?

A cluster is best described as a loosely knit confederation of businesses – manufacturers, suppliers, shippers, retailers and even promoters -- that have a stake in a common industry. A cluster need not be regional. In fact, most are not.

Wisconsin's successful printing cluster is spread over much of the state. Papermaking is among the top three employers in more than half of Wisconsin's 72 counties. The plastics cluster extends from one border of Wisconsin to the next. Elements of the state's transportation, biotechnology, medical devices and workforce development clusters can likewise be found in many locations.

Summit IV will perform a service if it can explain how clusters and regionalism can work together.

The Wisconsin Economic Summit was created by former UW Regents President Jay Smith and current UW System President Katharine Lyall as a way to leverage the power of the university to help renew Wisconsin's economy. That alone has been a positive influence. But has the business community become engaged? In a future column, I'll write about what the good the first three summits have done – or not done – for Wisconsin.

Still is president of the Wisconsin Technology Council and helped to moderate the first three Wisconsin Economic Summits, a role he will continue this year. For more information or to register, visit <http://www.wisconsin.edu/summit>

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