

News and Commentary

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[Editor's note: The actors in public policy include not only elected and appointed public officials, but also the public interest groups that promote various agendas. To help understand the perspectives of some of these groups, MPR plans to profile one of Maine's public interest groups in each issue.]

Maine's public interest groups: The Maine Economic Growth Council

Maine has lost more than 35,000 jobs since the recession began in 1989. State government, caught up in trying to cope with the recession's impact on the state budget, has been unable to develop policies that will stimulate economic growth and to create jobs. In March, Governor McKernan, Senate President Dutremble, and Speaker of the House Martin launched the Maine Economic Growth Council. This group of nearly 200 private sector representatives was charged with developing and recommending specific actions for the legislature to enact this session on economic revitalization. The Council also was charged with identifying longer term issues to enhance economic growth and to create jobs. The Council began deliberating March 9. The five "working groups" that comprise the Council are examining short- and long-term issues in five policy areas: energy and utilities, industrial policy, job training and education, regulatory policy, and tax and fiscal policy. Each working group includes 25 to 40 public members representing various business interests, as well as public interest groups. Ten legislators, representing related legislative committees, also participate in each working group.

The working groups, which met four times between March 9 and April 15, developed recommendations that were presented at an Economic Summit on April 26. Following any modification of the recommendations to respond to public input, the final recommendations are to be presented to the Legislature in early May.

The early meetings of the working groups predictably consisted largely of participants airing their frustrations and concerns. To focus the discussion, most working groups formed subcommittees or steering committees. As the process neared the late April deadline, the working groups had either achieved or nearly reached consensus on 28 short-term action recommendations. In addition, most groups developed lists of long-term issues, resolutions of which are more likely to have a positive effect on economic growth than whatever recommended short-term actions emerge from the process.

It is difficult to predict the success of the Maine Economic Growth Council. The limited period of time in which the Maine Economic Growth Council process occurred served to narrow the scope of possible consensus and thus the opportunities to produce significant actions. The Council effort does hold the potential for a process to continue into the future that may ultimately address some of the structural issues that underlie Maine's sluggish economy.

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