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A Wish List for Wisconsin

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Hey, Santa. Thinking of you with a policy wish list for the New Year.

Better pay for early childhood educators. As more Wisconsinites spend their day in the paid work force, the ability of parents to find quality child care becomes all the more important. Increased pay will increase training and reduce turnover; the end result is better care for our children. We need a way to bridge the gap between what parents can afford and what child care providers deserve to make.

A Latino Workers Center in Dane County. Latinos in Dane County face tremendous challenges in getting and keeping good jobs and overcoming discrimination. A Workers Center would provide low-wage workers, as well as those without jobs, with education and training in employment discrimination, sexual harassment, wage and hour claims, workers' compensation, occupational safety and health, and unemployment compensation, as well as grass-roots leadership and community organizing. The Workers Center would also provide access to legal services, financial counseling, translation and other services not readily available to low-income workers.

Real results from the economic summit. At this year's summit, the Greater Milwaukee Committee laid out several recommendations for moving Wisconsin ahead in the new economy - high-speed rail connecting Madison/Milwaukee/Chicago; a reformed work force development system driven by employer organization and demand; a commitment to "high road" economic development in the treatment of subsidies and tax policy; a new center for advanced manufacturing in Milwaukee, to take advantage of that region's historic strengths while capturing new global markets.

Let's put those suggestions into action. We've all got a stake in the economy - workers as well as business - and the level of public discussion of it can only be improved. We need a shared knowledge base for making some tough decisions about the future. Otherwise, that future's just going to happen by accident, and accidents can be ugly.

Expansion of successful economic cooperation. More training, better jobs, and stronger and more intelligent links between labor, business, community-based organizations and government aren't a pipe dream. We've shown that they can be made to work. The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership and the Milwaukee Jobs Initiative, two initiatives that the COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, is heavily involved in, are making tremendous strides in southeast Wisconsin to get workers the skills they need to get better jobs and provide the employers in the region with a work force that yields high productivity and quality goods. We need such partnerships throughout Wisconsin.

A clean, but hard-hitting, gubernatorial campaign. It's been a long time since this state had a serious conversation with itself about its future. That's why we started the Sustaining Wisconsin project in the first place, and we're making progress. Over the past several months, we've done literally hundreds of presentations around the state, and engaged thousands of community leaders in talking about where we are and where we want to be in Wisconsin. Let's have a lively, wide-open, clean set of political races in 2002, from the governor's race on down.

A beginning for the Milwaukee retrofit. As discussed in this space before, one natural project that would save money, generate jobs, connect residents of color to skilled but still lily-white trades, is a giant "retrofit" of Milwaukee housing and business to state-of-the-art technology on energy efficiency. San Francisco just beat us out by being the first city in the nation to begin doing just that.

Campaign finance reform and a state voter file. We ought to follow the lead of other states and move to public financing of our election system. The caucus scandal should convince you of the need for this. And we should have an integrated state voter file, fairly administered and available to all. We might then move on to a little proportional representation, or at least "fusion" - the 19th century practice, used throughout Wisconsin, that gave electoral minorities the ability to vote their values without wasting their votes, through the cross-endorsement, on their party line, of major party candidates.

A dose of reality on the plight of the working poor. The official federal poverty line for a family of four is less than \$17,500. Actual costs for supporting a family that size in Wisconsin (including shelter, food, transportation, taxes, child care, etc.) run from \$33,135 (near Superior) to more than \$38,000 (across the border from the Twin Cities). Yet we define poverty using the federal yardstick and begin to phase out supports for working families once they cross that magic line. We need to revise public policy to reflect the gap.

A place for all workers on the high road. Let's build a stronger wage and training foundation for all workers in the state. A partial list of options includes: increase the state's minimum wage and index it for inflation; improve opportunities for collective bargaining; improve and expand work force development and training initiatives; improve accountability in state and local economic development programs; increase employee ownership through regional investment funds, stock ownership plans and worker cooperatives; adjust the federal earned income tax credit so it phases out more slowly; extend health insurance coverage by improving Badger Care enrollment and eligibility; reform Wisconsin's tax system to make it more progressive; reform the current system of funding primary education and modify revenue caps to ensure that educational attainment is based on ability rather than ZIP code; and prepare non-college-bound high school students for the transition from school to work, to name a few.

* A strong economy, a healthy democracy, a clean environment, and livable and fun communities to raise kids and grow old in are in fact not so hard to achieve - if we work together. And they're slipping from our grasp if we continue to refuse to, as a state. So let's get it together in 2002.

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