Mix of North Dakota proposals seek to expand state’s tech-based economy, strengthen workforce

By Laura Tomaka
Thursday, December 16, 2010 at 03:53 PM

Several bills being introduced in 2011 North Dakota aim to bolster an already strong economy in that state.

When legislators return to state capitols in the Midwest, most will have to grapple with continued budget problems.

But as one lawmaker in North Dakota half-quipped about his state, “We respectfully declined to participate in the recession.”

The state, in fact, has prospered — as evidenced by its budget surplus and low unemployment rates, and the fact that it has been able to cut property taxes while increasing education spending in recent years.

North Dakota, however, is not without its economic and workforce challenges; chief among them are maintaining and growing the state’s population and workforce, and finding ways to create more high-tech, good-paying jobs.

“We need to continue to provide North Dakota with the tools to compete in the global economy,” says Sen. Tony Grindberg, who served as chair of the General Assembly’s interim Workforce Committee.

That committee, which met between July 2009 and September 2010, has produced a series of bills designed to further strengthen the state’s economy. Grindberg says the measures, which will be considered by the full legislature in 2011, have three central goals: promote entrepreneurship, grow the state’s technology-based economy, and strengthen the state’s workforce.

One proposal would create an innovation award program to help commercialize new technologies being developed by entrepreneurs associated with North Dakota’s higher-education institutions. These entrepreneurs would be eligible for “proof of concept” funding for early-stage projects with “high commercial potential.”

Other committee ideas include offering a matching grant program for startup technology businesses and establishing new tax credits tied to advanced manufacturing and technology-based economic development.
According to Grindberg, the bills closely align with a 10-year strategic plan developed by the state’s Department of Commerce that targets five sectors for economic growth: advanced manufacturing, technology-based businesses, value-added agriculture, tourism and energy. The plan also identifies four strategies for the state to pursue: invest in university-based research and development; foster entrepreneurship; invest in workforce education, training, recruitment and retention; and promote state exports.

Grindberg says his top priorities for the next session are to pass measures that establish Centers of Entrepreneurship Excellence and create a higher-education trust fund.

The centers would help provide consulting and professional services to entrepreneurs. In addition to these entrepreneurship centers, the committee is proposing a Centers of Research Excellence program, which would provide funding for university-based research being conducted in partnership with the private sector.

The goal of the higher-education trust fund is to establish a permanent source of revenue for the North Dakota Academic Merit and Career and Technical Scholarship Program. Created in 2009, the program provides $6,000 scholarships for students based on academic qualifications.

Under the interim committee’s proposal, the legislature would ask voters to use some money from the state’s Education Foundation Aid Stabilization Fund to pay for the scholarships on an ongoing basis.

Tags: