

Don Threewitt, City of Cheyenne

If it happens in Wyoming, it's news to me!

Economy: Are We There Yet?

The good news is, we've hit bottom. Maybe. Well, we think we've hit bottom. Actually, if enough people go shopping and build their savings at the same time, then we've hit bottom.

Wyoming has reached 6.5% unemployment as of this writing, which is the highest in 20 years. Coal and natural gas prices have tanked, spurring layoffs and general production slowdowns. Nationally, there were highly publicized celebrations of the Gross Domestic Product inching into the black for the first time in a few years. Of course, if it is solely due to the onset of federal stimuli (cash for clunkers) pushing up production, then this could only be a temporary relief.

Spillover spending of stimulus funding is just starting to roll in, and we anticipate some significant indirect activity over the next 2 years, with a tapering effect for the following 5 or 6 years. By official definitions, the recession is over. It just doesn't look that way.

Environment: The Big Straw

Millionaire Aaron Million's proposal to build a 560-mile pipeline from the Flaming Gorge Reservoir and the Green River across the State and south to Colorado's thirsty Front Range sounds like a reasonable request. Right? In theory, taking the water to the people and controlling the price of the spigot is simply a good business model. But grand projects such as this have failed in the past. Mr. Million's self-funded \$4 billion project has many critical concerns that move well-beyond the angry locals and the 2.5 million disenfranchised recreational visitors. Realities of cost-overruns and their subsequent scramble to the public bonding bailout are the norm for similar projects. Environmental impacts to the already stressed river are easily foreseeable, legal issues stemming from the Colorado River Compact, easement acquisitions and agricultural impacts all add up to a poor deal for Wyoming. And these are just the obvious holes in the straw.

Law : 2010 Legislative Preview

It's a little early to preview the draft bills, but there are some general themes that will likely be on the January docket. First, of self-serving concern is the issue of distributions for direct funding for municipalities. Bills that are advanced in this category will be watched carefully as this funding affects general fund operating revenue for most Wyoming cities and towns. Capital projects funding distribution, industrial siting and tax increment financing options round out the revenue side of the State watch list, according to the Wyoming Association of Municipalities. As mentioned later, siting, distribution, and taxation of wind energy will likely play a key role. Other priority concerns include: sales, use, and lodging tax modifications, updated contractor bonding requirements for public projects, priority of liens establishment, and State assistance with regional landfills and municipal solid waste projects. Overarching all of this will be the issue of whether the legislature decides to dip into the rainy day fund considering that it's, well...monsoon season.

Outreach: Affordable Housing and SSI

"Daily across Wyoming, we watch as persons with mental illness and co-occurring disorders go through our systems of help," said Regina Dodson, the Housing and Veteran Services Coordinator for the Wyoming Department of Health, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse Services, "...and all too often, there is no safe or affordable place to call home." Through the Community Mental Health Services Block Grant, Wyoming will initiate a new program to create and expand affordable, safe, permanent housing options for persons with mental illness, substance abuse, and co-occurring issues.

As a new contract position, the Creating Homes Facilitator (read: planner) will work across the State partnering with local communities and organizations to create permanent housing options for this

population. The program is modeled after the successful Creating Homes Initiative from Tennessee. “In Wyoming the average income of a person with a disability... is \$709.” Dodson said, noting that the average modest 1 bedroom apartment is \$668. Nationally, people with disabilities must pay 112.1% of their monthly income to rent a modest one-bedroom unit.

Community Development: Single Family Starts in Wyoming

Yet another storm that Wyoming has officially weathered: the housing bust. New single-family housing starts in Cheyenne are “bucking the trend” as they have increased 28% in 2009. Other Wyoming towns have begun to bounce back from the housing slowdown, including Rock Springs and Laramie. “Though Cheyenne is leading the way, the trend across Wyoming is on the way up,” according to Matt Ashby, Planning Services Director for the City of Cheyenne. The only Front Range city faring better than Cheyenne is the City of Denver, which has had 244 permits issued in the 1st and 2nd quarters of 2009.

Energy: Forget Tea, Tax the Wind!

I was driving down a relatively desolate stretch of I-25 last spring with a friend from the Fish and Wildlife Service. “Imagine,” he said, “10,000 windmills planted on that expanse of land... evenly distributed... it would be an industrial wasteland from here to the horizon.” Just last month, Governor Dave asked “Will people look at what we did and see the monsters that Don Quixote saw in windmills?”

While some think of the Wyoming populace as a bunch of coal-mining cowboys who’ve declared war on the environment, the reality is quite the opposite. I’ve met more environmentally responsible and reality-minded people here than anywhere else.

In August, the Wyoming Wind Symposium was a Statewide, multi-agency call to get to the bottom of long-term planning for wind. Among the topics examined in depth at the Symposium were the implications of federal policy, project siting and development strategy, transmission development and the impacts on Wyoming’s natural resources including its land and water, wildlife and cultural and historic sites.

“We are going to be the generation that sets the basic ground rules for how wind energy is developed in Wyoming” the governor said, “I expect the wind industry to do what it can to accommodate the sage grouse not being listed, which is the same as we have asked the coal and oil and gas industries to do... at the end of the day, we cannot end up with one industry compromising the economy of this state because we’ve decided that wind developers don’t have to live by the same rules as everyone else.”