

5-26-2017

Hello Sublette County, during the legislative interim (the period between legislative sessions), I am often requested by groups or state agencies to participate in meetings or forums. During the week of May 22, I attended meetings in Pinedale, Casper and Cheyenne regarding economic development, K12 education finance, prison reconstruction, and medically necessary placement of children.

On May 22, I met with Shawn Reese, the Director of the Wyoming Business Council, to discuss economic development in Sublette County. I believe Sublette, Teton, and north Lincoln counties have similar qualities of life and unique individual strengths, and should explore the creation of an economic development partnership. These contiguous mountain valleys offer a great place to live, work, and recreate. Teton County has the ability to attract wealth and entrepreneurs but lacks the space to expand, while Sublette and north Lincoln counties have the residential and commercial space available for expansion. Sublette County's minerals industry has allowed our county to develop community amenities unrivaled in other small population counties in Wyoming, with the Pinedale Aquatic Center, Sublette County Fairgrounds, and the Marbleton recreation center being good examples. During the last legislative session, the legislature created the ENDOW initiative to spur economic development in Wyoming. The time is right for these three mountain valleys to band together and forge an economic development partnership to enhance their communities. I will continue to pursue conversations with thought and governmental leaders to see if there is interest.

On May 23 in Casper, I complied with a request by the Wyoming Business Alliance Steering Committee to provide my views on Wyoming's K12 school funding crisis, and where the Select Committee on School Finance stood in the process of solving this crisis. Even after the cuts and revenue adjustments we made to K12 funding last session, Wyoming is still projected to have nearly a \$400 million deficit in K12 operations, major maintenance, and capital construction by 2022. The Legislature's Management Council finally released the RFP to secure the expertise our committee will need to complete an examination of the K12 funding model, but the RFP was released late and it remains to be seen if we will get quality applicants for that support. Members of the Business Alliance were concerned that the K12 system was not producing a high quality workforce, but they were also concerned about any tax increases to support the education funding crisis. Wyoming will have to cut education further, divert some existing revenues, and increase taxes to solve this problem. The question remains whether the legislature will act before we have completely spent our rainy day account, or before we are sued by the districts. I remain concerned about the effects of extensive cuts to Wyoming's educational system, and

especially the effects on small to mid-sized districts that don't have the economies of scale that exist in the larger districts.

On May 25, I attended a meeting of the Appropriation's sub-committee on prison facilities. Wyoming made the mistake of rebuilding its prison facility on the same dry lake bed where its predecessor had buckled atop expanding soils. Now, the replacement prison has also buckled, after construction features designed to account for the expandable soils were not adhered to. The Joint Appropriations Committee has been assigned the task of examining options to either repair or replace the existing structure, which has received emergency repairs to keep it functioning. It has been estimated that it may cost \$85+ million to repair the structure, or \$200-300 million to replace the structure. Do we repair the existing structure on the same bog hole where two prisons have failed? Or, do we spend two to three times the money to rebuild the prison in good soil? Wyoming is faced with this expensive decision during one of the worst economic downturns in our history, and at a time when we are facing historic deficits in education funding. There are options in prison facility development and operations today, which the subcommittee explored on Thursday. We heard from two companies that provide a breadth of options, from simple construction of a prison, to construction and lease with a purchase option, and finally construction and operation of the entire facility. Privately operated prisons have had their problems in the U.S., and have included poor rehabilitation of prisoners and large prison riots. Private prison facilities are common in the U.S. today however, and can provide a state whatever is desired in a prison facility and operations. It is the Appropriations Committee's responsibility to examine all of the options. Should Wyoming go down the track of a private/public partnership with prison construction and operations? Or, should we go down the traditional public procurement route to fix the prison issue?

Finally, on the afternoon of May 25, I sat in on a Wyoming Department of Education Task Force meeting that dealt with the education of the most challenging students in Wyoming. Children who are placed in educational residential facilities by either the courts or doctors pose a great expense and challenge to both school districts and those entities trying to provide the services. One of these children can cost upwards of \$100,000-\$200,000 per year. Funding for these students comes from a myriad of sources, with no clear-cut statutory direction. This group discussed the biggest problems, and some potential solutions.