

Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce: Gubernatorial debate should focus on economic issues

Posted on Thursday, Oct 13, 2022

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MADISON – Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC) – the combined state chamber and manufacturers’ association – urged journalists posing questions in Friday night’s gubernatorial debate to focus on economic issues that have consistently been a top concern for voters and the business community.

“Every Wisconsinite needs to know where the candidates for governor stand on important economic issues, like inflation and energy policy,” said WMC President & CEO Kurt R. Bauer. ““But businesspeople would also like more specific answers from the candidates on how they intend to address the worsening labor shortage and how to improve the abysmal reading and math proficiency scores in K-12 schools.”

In advance of Friday’s debate, WMC reached out to its Board of Directors, Small Business Committee and other members to see what topics they wanted the gubernatorial candidate to address. The diverse group of business leaders raised concerns about inflation, energy costs, tax policy, crime and education.

“As we see crime getting worse in communities around our state, it serves as a reminder that public safety is in fact an economic issue,” added Bauer. “Businesses won’t invest in areas of the state where they can’t protect their workers or their property.”

Below are the topics and suggested questions WMC believes the gubernatorial candidates should respond to:

Workforce

Wisconsin has an acute workforce shortage. It is so severe that many legacy Wisconsin companies are choosing to expand elsewhere because a long-term pipeline of workers is in doubt.

- What specific state-level policies would you pursue to help attract workers to Wisconsin?
- Would you support funding for a media campaign to encourage workers to move to Wisconsin?

Taxes

October is Manufacturing Month and manufacturing is Wisconsin's top economic sector - accounting for nearly 20 percent of state GDP.

- Would you maintain the existing Manufacturing & Agriculture Tax Credit that helps grow middle class-supporting manufacturing jobs and ensure it is not weakened in any way?

Many states, including Iowa, have recently reduced their personal income tax rates or adopted a flat tax for many reasons, including attempts to attract new businesses and workers. Wisconsin's highest rate is 7.65 percent, which is the second highest among neighboring states (Minnesota is 9.85 percent).

- With an estimated \$5 billion budget surplus, would you support using that surplus to move Wisconsin to a flat tax that is competitive with our Midwest neighbors?

Education

The *Wall Street Journal* recently ran an editorial bemoaning the extremely low reading and math proficiency scores in Illinois. But, Wisconsin's test scores are actually worse on many metrics, despite adding \$3.5 billion in baseline spending to public K-12 schools over the last five state budgets. Simply spending more money on education has not improved achievement.

- What will you do to improve academic attainment in Wisconsin?
- Would you support empowering parents to choose the best school to meet the education needs of their child by expanding school choice to all families in our

state?

Energy

There is a push to decarbonize the U.S. grid by 2035 – just 13 years from now. But, more than 80 percent of Wisconsinites heat their home with either natural gas or propane, and nearly three-quarters of electricity is produced by natural gas or coal-fired power plants. Further, less than one percent (0.18%) of vehicles registered in Wisconsin are EVs.

- If you support this type of energy shift, how would you ensure Wisconsinites continue to have reliable and affordable energy?
- With energy costs skyrocketing for businesses and consumers, what would you do as governor to combat this?

Crime

Last year, Wisconsin saw violent crime, murders and aggravated assaults rise to the highest level in over 35 years. In 2019, there were 98 homicides in Milwaukee, that number rose to 193 in 2021 and there have already been 183 in 2022.

- What would you do to fight crime and make Wisconsin communities safe again?