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Chambers, Economic Developers: Workforce, economic infrastructure key in rebuilding with ARPA Funds

LINCOLN – Leaders of chambers and economic development organizations from across the state today outlined a joint proposal to quickly ramp up workforce initiatives, talent attraction, innovation and economic infrastructure through the COVID-19 recovery. The proposal was introduced to Appropriations Committee members at an October 5 interim hearing on use of Nebraska’s approximately \$1 billion in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.

Initiatives are organized around four key themes: workforce; business relief and growth; quality of place; and diversity, equity and inclusion.

“Although several initiatives are featured in this proposal, one common thread binds them together – workforce,” said Bryan Slone, NE Chamber president. “Everywhere we go across the state, lack of available talent is the #1 issue holding us back from full economic recovery.”

Key considerations ask Nebraska leaders to help:

- Empower communities to attract new families;
- Invest in existing highly, successful workforce and economic development programs;
- Build sustainable business and education workforce infrastructure;
- Stimulate innovation to help fill the talent void, and drive training and higher paying jobs;
- Market the Good Life nationally with a focus on talent recruitment; and
- Improve the state’s “shovel-readiness” for megaprojects seeking new domestic sites right now.

“The name of the game right now in economic development, in communities of all sizes, is available workforce,” said Walker Zulkoski, President of the Nebraska Economic Developers Association. “By workforce, we don’t just mean more people, we mean people and all the infrastructure that supports them – housing, childcare, recreation, experiential learning and innovation capacity.”

The proposal complements economic development initiatives outlined in the [Blueprint Nebraska](#) statewide strategic plan, including attracting 43,000 18- to 34-year-olds to Nebraska by 2030, spurring construction of 40,000 housing units, and driving up annual income of every Nebraskan by \$15,000 by stimulating innovation and tech-enabled careers and training.

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Statements offered by partner organizations

Wendy Birdsall, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce President

“The Lincoln Chamber has been very pleased to collaborate with chambers of commerce and economic developers from across the state in developing a comprehensive list of recommendations for transformative investments. We appreciate that this is a start of a conversation about how to spend significant funds from the American Rescue Plan, and we look forward to partnering with all parties who are interested in growing jobs and building our workforce.”

David G. Brown, Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce President and CEO

“To sustain and expand Nebraska’s economy, targeted investment in Nebraska’s businesses and workers will not only provide immediate assistance to those impacted by the pandemic, but also make a significant and lasting difference in advancing Nebraska’s attractiveness as a place to live, work, play and compete.”

Jonathan Jank, Nebraska Chamber of Commerce Executives President and Seward County Chamber and Development Partnership President and CEO

“We’ve always known vibrant communities and great jobs attract new residents. Right now, quality of life is playing a greater role in families’ decisions to relocate – something Nebraska has in abundance. Our ARPA proposal will accelerate talent attraction in our area.”

Bryan Slone, NE Chamber President

“This ARPA proposal has big play potential to add to the 10-year gains we’ve been making over the last decade. The strength of the proposal lies in how aligned a diverse group of business and community leaders can be on next steps to move our state and its residents forward.”

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Joint Chambers' and Economic Developers' Workforce and Economic Infrastructure Proposal American Rescue Plan Act Funding

An historic \$110 million workforce proposal boosts the talent pipeline by investing in:

- Expanded career experiences (internships, apprenticeships, etc.) for high school and college students, including startup funding for educational and business program development.
- One-time grants for training, upskilling, apprenticeships and related program development costs.
- One-time grants for talent development plans to enhance local offerings that support retention and training of employees (including childcare, housing, loan assistance, etc.)
- A national talent recruitment campaign for Nebraska.

A game-changing business relief and growth proposal includes initiatives to help communities develop sites into major supply and logistics hubs, as well as support innovation initiatives across several sectors.

- \$195 million to a) improve communities' "shovel-readiness" for large industrial, transportation, transloading and supply-chain relocation and expansion projects seeking sites now, and b) fully fund ImagiNE Nebraska's Revolving Loan Fund to support flexible use of credits toward workforce training, childcare and other talent infrastructure.
- \$120 million to spur research and development and entrepreneurial investment in automation, digitization technology solutions to help fill the void when talent cannot be attracted and drive growth of higher paying jobs.

Targeted investments of \$20 million in diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives include significantly expanding:

- Business acumen training programs.
- Supply and service sourcing platforms to qualify more vendors, suppliers and contractors for work with each other.
- Financial literacy and credit remediation courses.

The chambers and economic developers have joined additional coalitions to avidly support proposals that ramp up communities' ability to attract new families, including much-needed, infusions into:

- Existing housing development grant programs (Rural Workforce, Middle Workforce, Affordable Housing Trust Fund, Low-Income Housing Tax Credits).
- Community Vitality Grants, such as the Civic and Community Center Financing Fund.
- Childcare infrastructure and workforce, such as WAGE\$, T.E.A.C.H., public-private partnerships, and addressing the benefits cliff.
- Large-scale recreational investments, such as those being investigated by the Legislature's STARWARS Committee.
- Statewide electric vehicle charging infrastructure.
- Statewide broadband and high-speed internet access.

As requested by legislators, the proposal offers broad public and economic benefit, with a focus on one-time, shot-in-the-arm initiatives that accelerate quality of life and economic competitiveness while leveraging existing state programs and legislation as much as possible.