

Progress Made; Work to be Done

By Richard P. Rush

With the 2009 legislative session behind us, our state legislators are to be congratulated. Many bills they passed and Gov. Brad Henry signed let the world know Oklahoma is truly open for business. We're now more competitive than ever in the race for new economic development and jobs - good jobs - for Oklahomans.

Topping the accomplishments was The State Chamber's number one priority - major legal reform. These changes will fairly compensate injured Oklahomans, and at the same time, discourage frivolous lawsuits. Access to affordable health care should increase, as Oklahoma should no longer lose doctors, nurses and prosperity to states with better laws.

Insurance costs were addressed in other bills, as well. New policies will soon be offered to healthy Oklahomans under 40, without costly mandates. The Insure Oklahoma Program - where employers, employees and the state share employee health insurance costs - will offer more low-price choices, like high-deductible health savings accounts, to cover major medical expenses. Funding for Tulsa's Oklahoma State University Medical Center guarantees osteopathic physicians who often work in rural and underserved areas.

The new 21st Century Quality Jobs Program should attract high-paying jobs in growth industries. Innovative bills to allow cities, towns and counties to pool resources on economic development projects are certain to pay off, especially in rural Oklahoma.

Water is critical to our daily lives and commerce. It is a resource that needs to be developed and used to benefit our state. On average, 35 million acre feet flow out of Oklahoma annually to become polluted in the Gulf of Mexico. House Bill 1483 gives Oklahomans priority

to use Oklahoma water while opening the door for future water sales to others if they meet certain statutory criteria.

In education, professionals from the private sector can more easily become math and science teachers. Department of Education accountability changes will ensure student testing and data gathering is more accurate and accessible to the public. The State Chamber worked to kill many bad bills that, while well intentioned, were job-killers. One replaced our individual income tax system with a flat tax. Another repealed the Oklahoma Opportunity Fund for economic development, transferring its reserves to the general fund. Other punitive workplace bills would have increased the cost of doing business at a time when attracting new jobs and opportunity is crucial.

Oklahoma workplaces engaged in the legislative

process like never before. Our free Oklahoma Prosperity Project letter-writing service at www.okprosperity.com let employers and employees send hundreds of letters to state legislators, the governor and our Congressional delegation on priority economic issues.

Our voices were heard. But our challenges continue. Our president and members of Congress are at work on new tax policies and major health care, energy, competitiveness and workplace changes. How will they impact Oklahoma's economy, jobs and prosperity? Our updates at www.okstatechamber.com keep you informed, and give you the tools to speak up.

Oklahoma made a lot of progress during the last legislative session, but The State Chamber's work is far from over.

Rush is president and CEO of The State Chamber of Oklahoma.

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