

Prosperity Project expands state election coverage

by Kirby Lee Davis. Published: March 1st, 2010

TULSA – The nonpartisan Oklahoma Prosperity Project will expand its statewide election coverage this year to better meet its voter education goals.

Chairman Dana Weber credits the six-year-old State Chamber of Oklahoma-supported project for helping the Sooner State achieve a more business-friendly legislative environment.

"This started before the downturn in the economy," said Weber, president of Sand Springs-based Webco Industries. "I think everybody wants a strong economy and good jobs. I think it's more a matter of people being aware of which candidates support which issues."

This year the Oklahoma Prosperity Project intends to provide data on more statewide races, including judicial campaigns.

"We've had a lot of people saying, 'This is good, we have a lot of information about the state legislative offices, House and Senate, but what about other offices?' said Weber, who has participated in the service since its 2004 launch. "We've had some people ask us about getting on to the local level. They love the information so much they want more of it."

More than 1,340 Oklahoma companies rely on the State Chamber program to provide election information for their 487,000 employees. Some 90 local chambers of commerce and trade associations also participate.

The Prosperity Project traditionally surveyed candidates for Congress and the state Legislature on key business issues, such as taxes, health care, and transportation, posting their results on the newly redesigned www.okprosperity.com. It also analyzes state questions.

This year Project Director Kris Rush will add candidate surveys for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and labor commissioner posts.

"There are so many elections where all you know about the candidate is their advertising on TV or yard signs," said Weber. "It's very difficult to get information on what candidates really believe in, and not only candidates but issues. It was purely a matter of providing an objective source, not a candidate source, about the issues important to the economy of Oklahoma."

Due to the individual nature of judicial reviews, the Prosperity Project will provide biographies of judges, but make no effort to evaluate their actions.

"It's not like you have legislative issues to deal with," said Weber. "No two judicial decisions are exactly alike. How do you provide information that is objective and not subjective?"

The project provides information to employers at no cost. In many cases Weber said this has allowed companies to strengthen its relationship with workers.

"I've gotten a very positive feedback from our employees," she said. "There have been times when I've walked into the break room and seen people holding a copy of one of the ballots, talking about the questions on the ballots and wondering what it meant."

To reach younger voters, she said the Prosperity Project will embrace Twitter, Facebook and other social media channels. Major voter drives in June and October will follow registration deadlines for the primary and general elections.

"We don't tell them how to think," said Weber. "We ask questions on issues we think are important to business, the candidates answer them. Each individual can decide what answers they like."

Having seen many Webco employees using the site, Weber believes the Oklahoma Prosperity Project has made a great impact on the state.

"Over time we're seeing a more business-positive Legislature," said Weber. "It's hard to say with certainty, but I think what we have seen is a much greater awareness of the issues that are important to growing business and growing the economy in the state. I think people are far more aware of what those issues are, what is important, and in addition, which legislators and candidates support the issues."