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Retired Nebraska National Guard Chief to Direct Economic Institute

By Steve Jordan

The retired chief of the Nebraska National Guard has a new role: executive director of a new nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank that he says will propose "free-enterprise solutions" to vital economic issues.

The Platte Institute for Economic Research won't write legislation or lobby, said retired Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke. It will recommend changes in laws and other public policy actions based on research it sponsors.

"We're looking for dynamic ideas on where we ought to head in the future," Lempke said.

The institute's first topics for study: tax policy and spending; enhancing the state's educational structure; evaluating ways to control health care spending; and managing Nebraska's water resources.

The Platte Institute also plans to encourage "transparency in government," recommending ways government agencies can make services and information more readily available to the public.

While such organizations often are characterized as conservative, Lempke said, the Platte Institute's efforts should find supporters across the ideological spectrum.

"Free enterprise is all of us," said Lempke, who grew up on a family farm near Tecumseh, Neb. The Platte Institute, whose logo shows the Platte River running across the entire state as a unifying element, is intended to work on issues affecting the entire state.

Besides a 38-year military career, Lempke worked for Brunswick Corp.'s defense manufacturing group in Lincoln. He considered other job offers after retiring in November as the state's adjutant general.

"I wanted to stay engaged with Nebraskans," he said.

The Platte Institute will not deal with social issues unless they have a direct impact on economic growth, he said. For example, the institute might study immigration as it relates to the economy but not as a political or social issue.

The foundation grew out of conversations last year between Pete Ricketts of Omaha, the Republican Party's 2006 Senate candidate and now the Nebraska Republican Party's new national committeeman, and Mike Groene of North Platte, Neb., who sponsored an unsuccessful state spending lid petition drive.

Besides Ricketts and Groene, the institute's other board members are Omaha investment adviser Gail Werner-Robertson and Valentine, Neb., attorney Warren Arganbright, a former candidate for the

Legislature who has been active in water issues.

The board will expand to eight or nine members, Lempke said.

Ricketts, president of the board, said the directors eventually will include Democrats, independents and people from across the state who want to see "rigorous academic information" on issues.

Ricketts said Lempke will be the institute's public face, while he and other board members will provide oversight, give strategic direction and support its work.

"We definitely have a philosophy that free-market solutions can be very beneficial and ultimately more sustainable" than government programs, Ricketts said. "We obviously believe that you can trust people and we should work to have more individual responsibility, that smaller government's a good thing."

The free market is not the solution to every problem, he said. For example, the institute wouldn't favor doing away with taxes but would offer research to show the best way society should tax itself.

Lempke said about a dozen people have contributed so far, and he plans a statewide appeal to generate broad financial support and interest. The institute's first-year budget will be between \$300,000 and \$400,000.

The institute, formed legally last fall but being announced now, is affiliated with the State Policy Network, which serves similar organizations in 42 states that champion personal and economic freedom.

In Iowa, a similar group is the Public Interest Institute, situated at Iowa Wesleyan College in Mount Pleasant.

Lempke, who lives in Lincoln, commutes to the institute's new office in Omaha's Regency office park. The institute has one other staff member and is hiring a third person, possibly as a research associate. The staff would expand as the institute's work grows.

The institute's official kickoff will be an invitation-only supper Monday at the Omaha Press Club to inform civic and business leaders about the group and to seek donors and potential board members.

Lempke plans a similar event in Lincoln and hopes to speak to civic and community groups.

Besides money from Nebraska donors, Lempke said, the institute may receive grants from national organizations that support free enterprise.

Creighton University economist Ernie Goss is conducting the institute's first study, a comparison of Nebraska's tax system with those of bordering states.

By contracting with researchers such as Goss and hiring its own research staff, Lempke said, the institute plans to produce three to six major studies per year and turn out position papers, opinion articles for newspapers and other publications.

Recent findings by public policy think tanks in other states:

Arkansas Policy Foundation: Grocers passed along savings from a tax cut on food, showing that consumers did benefit from the tax reduction.

Public Interest Institute, Iowa: Following a 10 percent income tax cut in 1997, Iowans' income has grown,

tax collections are up and employment and population have increased.

Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, Kansas: After a study showing health care alternatives, the Kansas Health Policy Authority backed off on plans to push for universal health care.

The Show-Me Institute, Missouri: The use of eminent domain hurts economic development by creating uncertainty, harming small businesses, destroying affordable housing and undermining low-income communities.

Wisconsin Policy Research Institute: Studies showed problems with adopting a single-payer health care system, exposed an oil company franchise fee issue and called for deregulating cable TV.

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