

Businesses mainly optimistic about economy, says IBAW director

By Mary Reardon - Special to Conley News Service

July 19, 2018

BROOKFIELD – General optimism on the direction of the economy and a wait-and-see attitude on tariffs imposed by the Trump administration are what Independent Business Association of Wisconsin Executive Director Steve Kohlmann is hearing these days from members of the group he leads.

The oft-lamented state labor shortage is on top of their minds as well, according to Kohlmann. Kohlmann takes the temperature of IBAW's 160 member businesses during monthly meetings at the Wisconsin Club in downtown Milwaukee, and at executive education sessions, networking gatherings and other events.

Recent speakers at IBAW meetings include Bill Mitchell, a vice president of business operations for Foxconn; Milwaukee County Acting Sheriff Richard Schmidt; and Craig Culver, co-founder of Culver's Restaurants. The April meeting featured Republican U.S. Senate candidate and Wisconsin Senator Leah Vukmir; and Brett Healy, executive director of Wisconsin-based think tank Maclver Institute.

Rob Lewis, CEO of Lewis Station Winery of Lake Mills, will be featured during at IBAW's meeting Friday.

The Brookfield-based advocacy group, founded in 1973 to address a perceived disconnect between manufacturing firms and government, caters to small, independent businesses who espouse free market thinking. Small is defined as \$5 to \$75 million in sales. The cost of IBAW membership ranges from \$300 to \$600, depending on company size.

IBAW provides materials to help businesses digest issues emanating from Madison and Washington. Fewer government restrictions for businesses are "a constant battle and always will be," according to Kohlmann. Lower tax rates remain a theme.

Among IBAW's materials are its monthly business magazine, which has recently expanded, Kohlmann says. Dan Hansen, director of administrative services at St. Mary Parish in Hales Corners, is the president of the organization. Kohlmann's been in his position for over four years and was previously with Heritage Printing/Cultivate Communications in Brookfield. Since 2012, he's also serves as a supervisor for the Town of Brookfield.

Kohlmann runs monthly sales roundtable events, where IBAW members discuss challenges in sales marketing and branding and share solutions. "I think cold calling is dead," is one conclusion Kohlmann has drawn from these sessions.

IBAW is involved with the Joseph Project, the Milwaukee-based effort that offers job-seeker boot camp and connecting job seekers to employment opportunities outside the city. More businesses are trying to figure out how they can get workers from central Milwaukee to them, Kohlmann says.

To attract and keep workers, businesses are also "communicating to the general public that they're a cool place to work on their websites and social media."



Steve Kohlmann, executive director of Brookfield-based Independent Business Association of Wisconsin, gives a tour of the parking structure at The Corners of Brookfield. As a supervisor for the Town of Brookfield, Kohlmann helped oversee development of the \$250 million retail center, which opened in April 2017.

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