



Effort attempts to inspire change statewide

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TRAVERSE CITY -- Phil Power is tired of hearing about a Michigan government that just can't seem to get anything done.

A partial shutdown of state departments in October lasted four hours, and occurred because legislators failed to adopt a new budget in time. Cuts to higher education and natural resources, he said, mean scaling back on important services.

Power is ready for a change. And, he figures, he's not the only one.

He's using that sentiment as the driving factor behind a new grassroots initiative, Michigan's Defining Moment, that seeks to unite people across the state in an effort to bring about change devoid of partisan politics.

"The purpose of that is to develop a shared vision for the state," said Power, president of nonprofit, Ann Arbor-based The Center for Michigan, which is leading the campaign. "The net effect is to call forth a new civic leadership in this state that is confident and pragmatic."

The initiative is divided into three stages, the first of which is under way. Scheduled to end in May, the first phase consists of a series of small community dialogues among leaders. Citizens will be able to offer their views online.

He hopes as many as 10,000 people will offer input by the time the campaign ends in late 2010, and that the common principles established early on will begin to take shape.

Power is the cousin of 13th Circuit Judge Thomas Power, and relatives once owned a cherry orchard near Elk Rapids. He is an entrepreneur who for years headed a chain of community newspapers, and sat on a number of corporate and nonprofit boards before forming The Center for Michigan in 2006.

Doug Luciani, president and chief executive officer of the Traverse City Area Chamber of Commerce, lent his name to the campaign as one of its founding "champions," who lead the momentum in regions across the state.

Removing partisan politics from the equation makes this effort unique, Luciani said, since much of government revolves around party lines.

"That is what it is. And absent any other type of grassroots or citizen involvement in the process, that's all that there will be," Luciani said. "This isn't an initiative to replace what politicians do. It's an initiative to give the citizens a meaningful discussion."

He added that he hopes policymakers in Lansing will support the end result.

But whether they will is the real challenge, said Marsha Smith, executive director of Rotary Charities of Traverse City.

Smith led a local community dialogue this fall, and said those who attended raised concerns about the future of Michigan's education system and natural resources.

"As long as we have term limits and folks that are elected to short terms, it's going to be real difficult for them to look at long-term solutions," Smith said.

How will Power know if he's successful? He said the way to judge success is not in terms of winning or losing, but in whether he can see a rise in civic leadership throughout the state.

And while 10,000 participants might seem out of reach, Power said the fact that at least 400 more people than expected participated in the first round of discussions is a positive sign.

"If you treat people like adults and tell them everything that you're doing and invite a response, then you're going to grow a movement," he said. "We want to set the process in motion."

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Philip H. Power, president of The Center for Michigan. Record-Eagle