

Walker listens to county input

By Alexa Zoellner azoellner@dailyunion.com | Posted: Tuesday, May 10, 2016 9:02 am

JEFFERSON — Gov. Scott Walker visited Jefferson Monday as part of a series of listening sessions he has been conducting throughout the state.

Approximately 40 people from Jefferson County joined the governor at Jefferson City Hall from 12:30 to 2 p.m. While their discussion was by invitation only and closed to the media, Walker took the time to speak with the Daily Union later that afternoon.

“It was good,” Walker said of the listening session. “We really tried to get a diverse group of people, both in terms of backgrounds, professions, ages, probably even some politics. We try to mix it up to everything from high school students, teachers, superintendents, small business owners, local government officials, nonprofits, healthcare providers, bankers, you name it.”

Among those in attendance were state Sen. Steve Nass; state Reps. Cody Horlacher and Joel Kleefisch; Barbara LeDuc, president/CEO of Opportunities Inc.; Leigh Price, executive director of the Jefferson Chamber of Commerce; Jefferson Police Chief Ken Pileggi; Jefferson Mayor Dale Oppermann; Jefferson city attorney Ben Brantmeier; Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier; School District of Jefferson Superintendent Craig Gerlach; Lee Burgess of the Highway 18 Outdoor Theatre; St. Coletta of Wisconsin director of marketing and public relations Robin Novesky; David Diestler, Jefferson



LET'S TALK

LET'S TALK — Gov. Scott Walker visited Jefferson Monday where he held a listening session in city hall. People from around the county were invited to provide input on the state of Wisconsin. Prior to the event, Walker met with some of the people involved in the proposed Osteopathic College of Wisconsin to discuss the project. Above, Walker prepares to speak about the college. Pictured above are, from left to right — Rep. Cody Horlacher, Gov. Walker, Sen. Steve Nass, Jefferson County Board Chairperson Jim Schroeder, Jefferson County Administrator Ben Wehmeier and project developer Jennifer DeKrey. Not pictured, but present at the meeting, were fellow project developer Mark Lefebvre and Jefferson Mayor Dale Oppermann. For more photos click [here](#).

County Fair Park director; Jefferson County Board of Supervisors Chairperson Jim Schroeder; and four high school students, among others.

“What I ask people are three things: What do they love about Wisconsin? Where do they want the state to be in 20 years? How should we measure getting there?” Walker said. “I ask those questions and it’s all up to them. It’s all driven by what they say and I write down on a big whiteboard. ... As you can imagine, most of the talk in general is about where do you want to be in 20 years.”

That’s why it is so important to include students in the discussions, he said. In 20 years, they’re the ones that “matter probably the most” regarding what is going to keep young people in Wisconsin.

Discussion topics presented by attendees included drugs, including the heroin epidemic; some safety concerns, and economic development.

“It’s interesting. Every area’s always a little unique,” the governor said. “But, by and large, the big thing that we hear here, and I’ve heard about every session, it’s really about workforce increasing because of all the employment opportunities. We’ve had a couple examples of businesses that announced layoffs, but overwhelmingly, people are still looking for workers.”

Walker said that what he heard during the session was “pretty consistent” with what he has heard elsewhere.

“A good chunk of the listening sessions I’ve done are in smaller- to mid-sized communities or counties,” he said. “People like the small-town environment, they like the general niceness of the people, the closeness of the community, so those are pretty common things. Then we talk about the challenges.

“The big thing I hear is, ‘how do we keep our students here?’ or at least get them to come back?” Walker continued. “That ties into people not only wanting their children or grandchildren (to stay here), but also employers looking to hire talented people. How do you help small businesses? That came up quite a bit. Both the existing small businesses, as well as somebody that wants to start a small business here.”

When asked about retaining students after graduation, the governor said it goes, in part, to two things.

“One: jobs. And not just jobs, but careers,” he explained. “The more career opportunities that are here, the better off. Along with that, it’s not just about jobs, it’s about quality of life in the sense that it’s not just about a job to pay bills.”

Questions to ask are, “is it a career interest?” and “is it a good quality of life?” he pointed out.

“For us, helping not just the state, but our communities, have decent quality of life is an appeal,” Walker said. “Having major employers help (is good), but you think a little bit further.”

He cited Epic Systems in Verona, which has just shy of 10,000 employees and the overwhelming majority of new hires are millennials.

“And they’re growing. They’ve got five more buildings up and they’re already close to 10,000 people, so they’ll be well over that,” the governor said. “Those are good technical, healthcare and IT-related jobs.”

The state is looking to other sectors, as well, he said, pointing to manufacturing as a recent focus.

“Those are good, middle-class jobs,” Walker said. “But they’re not the same as our parents or grandparents. It’s not enough to just run a piece of equipment. Typically, people have to be a bit more advanced and know how to program and run a number of different pieces of equipment. We can do that, but we just have to make sure people have the skills to fit those jobs.”

Walker also spoke about the large number of layoffs that recently have, or are planned to take place, in Jefferson County. Among them are Littelfuse, formerly Hamlin, in Lake Mills; McCain Foods in Fort Atkinson and, this June, Tyson Foods in Jefferson.

“The good news is, overall, the state’s unemployment rate is one of the lowest its been in a couple decades. We’re at 4.5 percent,” he said. “Last month’s job report showed that we were the highest number of total people employed — over 3 million for the first time ever. So statewide, the state’s doing very well. Employment’s much better than the nation as a whole.

“We’ve just got to make sure that in areas like Jefferson County, where there’ve been a couple big (companies closing), that we help offset that,” he said.

The government works with a combination of municipal, county and regional economic development efforts, Walker explained.

“Not only in helping preserve jobs ... but by and large, the best thing we can do is help make it easier to create jobs and opportunities, particularly for startups,” he said. “Because, long-term, that’s where most of the new jobs are going to come from: in small businesses expanding, new businesses starting up.

“We do Main Street programs, we do incentives to help with start-ups (and) we’re going to continue doing things like that,” Walker continued. “The other part is that, even for those businesses that have announced layoffs, worker training and retraining that we do through Wisconsin’s Fast Forward is incredibly important because, you know, you go a county over to Dane County and they have one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state. One of the lowest actually in the country. So there are jobs, if not in Jefferson County, then nearby.”

Part of it is helping people get trained for the jobs that are open, whether they are nearby or within the region, he said.

“While there’s obviously been some big announcements here and we hope to build helping off that, the overall state of the state is fairly positive,” the governor commented. “Highest number of people working ever, job growth in the state from February to March was the fifth-highest in the country, first in the Midwest.”

According to Walker, the labor force participation rate, the percentage of people working, was 68.8 percent.

“So in terms of where do we rank with others, right now, as of late, we’re doing pretty well,” he said. “But obviously, we want to make sure that everyone who wants a job is able to find a job, particularly in areas where there have been bigger employers making announcements. We need to help a little bit more. That’s what we’re trying to figure out what to do.”

In addition to the listening session, Walker sat down with Wehmeier, Schroeder, Oppermann, Nass, Horlacher and project directors Mark Lefebvre and Jennifer DeKrey to speak about the proposed College of Osteopathic Medicine.

“It certainly sounds very interesting,” Walker said. “That was really our first chance to sit down and really look at it. Obviously, we’d love to help grow the economy here in Jefferson County, but ... there’s a series of questions we have to ask. They’re looking for the state to make a capital investment, which is interesting. I think we’d want to make sure we knew what, if any, long-term operating costs (there would be).”

In January, Horlacher, Nass, City of Jefferson and Jefferson County officials went before the Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities in the state Capitol for a public hearing on a bill seeking a \$25 million construction grant for the proposed \$125 million college.

“It doesn’t appear as if they’d need (the funds) right now, unlike the other medical colleges, but that’s something we’d have to at least look at,” Walker said. “We won’t start doing our capital budget until July and August and that will be for the budget we put out probably early in February next year. So if we were going to do anything, that would be the spot. We’re just in the early stages, so a meeting like this is perfect.”