

Business lobby approves platform

By: CHRIS BAGLEY - Staff Writer

TEMECULA ---- The main lobbying group for Southwest County businesses Monday laid out two dozen legislative priorities for the year, addressing issues ranging from water supply to the privatization of some government services.

The Southwest California Legislative Council's 27-point platform doesn't propose specific legislation, but provides a framework for considering bills that come before the state Legislature and local governments in Riverside County. The group is a coalition of chambers of commerce in Lake Elsinore, Murrieta and Temecula.

Board members will discuss bills that could affect local businesses and vote to support or oppose particular legislation. The group would then encourage its 2,500 member businesses and others to use its Web site to draft and send letters to state legislators.

Few of the 27 points explicitly state the direction the group might take. One stipulates that the council "review and consider state and local tax increases."

The group also pledges to "monitor and review alternatives to (1) any proposed state minimum wage increases and (2) any local or state living-wage ordinances."

Shaun Lumachi, the group's governmental affairs adviser, said its board will review a dozen specific business-related bills at its February meeting and another dozen at its March meeting.

Many of the 27 priorities are similar or identical to those it had last year, but the issues before the Legislature could vary.

The council and other business groups across the state could, for example, find themselves fighting a new push to raise California's minimum wage from \$6.75 an hour. One ballot initiative that could come before voters this year would raise the hourly minimum to \$8.75. Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed raising the floor to \$7.75 an hour.

The council also set out a range of issues that relate to privatization and outsourcing of government services, infrastructure, tax credits and regulations on businesses.

In a letter last week, it urged Assemblyman John Benoit, R-Riverside, to introduce a bill that would allow the governor to declare a "transportation state of emergency" and thus bypass some of the usual procedures for approving highway projects. The bill could face opposition from environmental and labor groups. Benoit is likely to seek a moderate Democrat to cosponsor the bill, Lumachi said.

The lobbying group is entering its second year. It formed in January 2005, and hired Lumachi to help its member businesses communicate with the Legislature and local governments.

Lumachi works just one day each week for the council. It renewed his contract for 2006, but could hire a full-time legislative consultant by the end of the year.

That could add an average of \$25 to the annual dues paid by members of the chambers that approve it. The Lake Elsinore Valley Chamber of Commerce recently decided to raise dues by \$35.

The council also plans to seek corporate sponsorship to offset the costs. Lumachi said the its board would hire the consultant based on the funds it could raise. It would also consider a part-time consultant, he said.

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