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Portland economic cabinet looks to long-term job growth, business development

By Mark Larabee, The Oregonian

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In the face of rising unemployment and darkening revenue forecasts, Portland Mayor Sam Adams this morning convened the first meeting of his new economic cabinet.

The group of 67 people -- nearly 80 were invited -- got a crack-of-dawn start, meeting for almost two hours to talk about a five-year economic development strategy that Adams hopes will brand the city as the nation's most sustainable, focus community colleges and universities on developing training programs for workers in targeted industries and create 10,000 new family wage jobs.

The draft plan distributed this morning focuses on clean and sustainable industries, sport-clothing design, software and advanced manufacturing. The goal is to attract new businesses in these fields to Portland or to seed small companies with money and help so they can prosper in both the national and international marketplaces. About 90 percent of Portland-based companies have less than 100 employees.

"We're putting our stake in the ground with this plan by saying we're going to make Portland the center for clean tech and sustainable business," said Peter Cunningham of the Portland Development Commission.

The cabinet, which includes representatives from Portland business and labor groups, government and academia, faces a daunting task. The world economy is being wrenched by its worst crisis in six decades. While employment grew in the metro region by 12 percent between 1997 and 2007, job growth within the central city remained flat during that time.

Earlier emphasis on investments in quality of life issues, including transit, infrastructure, housing and social services, have attracted many people to Portland but have not created an boom in employment of skilled workers. The new strategy will sharpen the city's mission, requiring investment in retaining and growing companies, training workers, making money available and other direct economic incentives.

"This is not a wish list," Adams told the group at the outset of the meeting. "This is intended to focus on the most immediate and critical actions that we need to take."

Much of the planning work is being undertaken by the Portland Development Commission, a city agency whose mission has been shifted under the Adams administration to focus on economic development and the creation of jobs and wealth.

But while Portland leaders have long believed that the sustainable and green economy was theirs to own, there was acknowledgment in the room that these buzzwords are taking root with planners in cities all across the nation. And many are larger, more prosperous cities with more cash to woo green companies. Without significant investments, some said, Portland could have trouble making their vision a reality.

--Mark Larabee: 503-294-7664; marklarabee@news.oregonian.com

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