

Pillen kicks off ‘6 Regions, One Nebraska’ in North Platte

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The three-year economic development effort that aims to build cooperation and relationships within the state’s six community college regions in growing their economies and populations, Gov. Jim Pillen said.

Gov. Jim Pillen on Tuesday made North Platte the launching point for a new economic development initiative meant to nudge all Nebraskans to work together for statewide growth.

The governor led a morning press conference at North Platte Community College’s North Campus announcing “6 Regions, One Nebraska,” a three-year effort that aims to build cooperation and relationships within the state’s six community college regions.

It was followed by the initial Mid-Plains Region meeting of some 80 community leaders within the 18-county Mid-Plains Community College Area. Similar groups will first meet in June in the Western, Central, Northeast, Southeast and Metro regions.

Valentine Mayor Kyle Arganbright and Gary Person, president and CEO of the North Platte Area Chamber & Development Corp., have been named Mid-Plains Region co-chairs.

They and their counterparts each will lead “work teams” backed up by private funds and \$3 million budgeted by the Legislature from Nebraska’s share of COVID-19 relief aid, said K.C. Belitz, director of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development.

Belitz and Pillen stressed that Nebraskans have to set aside age-old attitudes that economic success requires their communities to triumph over other cities in the state for jobs and residents.

“My generation would be very guilty about competing,” Pillen said. “We have to keep competing, but what’s important is we don’t compete against (each other). We compete together. We compete together for the greater good of Nebraska.”

“Today in Nebraska, it’s really about growing our own — growing our own people, investing in our own places and certainly growing our own businesses through entrepreneurship and innovation,” Belitz said.

In such an environment, “the odds just aren’t as good that you have all the resources you need to be successful in economic development in one community.”

Belitz said funds from the state appropriation and the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce & Industry are paying for six full-time “regional navigators” to help the regional co-chairs bring their communities together.

Each region’s respective community college will be a vital partner in its initiatives, he added. Mid-Plains Area President Ryan Purdy also took part in Tuesday’s press conference.

State Chamber President Bryan Slone said 6 Regions, One Nebraska builds upon Blueprint Nebraska, a statewide 2018-19 planning effort that devised 15 initiatives to make Nebraska more competitive for population and economic growth nationally.

“This is the product of a discussion that’s been going on for five, six years now,” Slone said. “One of the things that seemed to be missing over the years is the connectivity between states and communities.”

That includes realizing that the “solution sets” for economic growth in greater Nebraska cities and towns “are very different than where I live now in Omaha,” he said.

A DED brochure says 6 Regions, One Nebraska’s public-private investments also will help fund “initial regional projects” focused on resident recruitment, youth engagement, entrepreneurship, technology, infrastructure or a project specific to a specific region.

Leaders of the Mid-Plains Region will identify their 18 counties’ strengths through “asset mapping,” as will each of its counterparts. Pillen will meet twice a year with each regional team for work sessions, the brochure said.

“Government provides seed money. I don’t believe government solves problems,” Pillen said. “It’s bringing people, businesses, ranchers, farmers together to solve problems.”

Slone cited North Platte’s aggressive community and economic renewal this decade as a reason for announcing the new initiative at Mid-Plains. The city won the Governor’s Showcase Community Award in 2021 and the Nebraska Diplomats’ Nebraska Community of the Year Award in 2023.

“We’re seeing a renaissance in communities all across the state, including the very community we’re in right now,” he said.

Person, a key player in that ongoing renewal, talked about the critical role of citywide cooperation in a succession of small and large initiatives headlined by the Sustainable Beef LLC project.

“I think when you look at North Platte, the resurgence that’s happened here in the last few years, it’s because people came together and started working together instead of against each other,” said the Panhandle native and former Sidney city manager.

Arganbright, a Valentine business leader as well as his city’s mayor, said he was excited to see state leaders working to unite Nebraskans for the common good of their region and state.

“This is the first time in 15 years of being involved out west that I’ve seen this type of force together to grow rural Nebraska,” he said. “It’s never happened before.”