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The San Diego Union-Tribune

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. A-1

LENGTH: 1138 words

HEADLINE: Lawmakers may buy ideas to save jobs, and own careers

BYLINE: DANA WILKIE, Staff Writer

DATELINE: SACRAMENTO

BODY:

SACRAMENTO -- Painfully aware that lost jobs are a top issue this election year, lawmakers now clashing on budget issues may find unusual agreement on business-boosting ideas by the Council on California Competitiveness. Pro-business or not, state legislators may feel compelled to embrace yesterday's plan to help California businesses make money and create jobs -- if not for the future of the state's economy, then for the future of their own political careers. Few state senators and Assembly members yesterday had seen the report written by Gov. Pete Wilson's 17 council appointees; it was a sober document concluding that state and local governments need an instant attitude adjustment toward business if California wants to lure and keep jobs here.

The question floating around the Capitol, in the words of one assemblyman, was how to keep the council's document from becoming just "our 23rd economic development plan" -- full of good intentions but lacking the cooperation between Democrats and Republicans to translate it into public policy. Tax breaks for small business, fewer government regulations, "one-stop" permit shopping, less litigation and longer school years are some suggestions by the council, which Wilson appointed late last year to write a bipartisan statement of California's economic problems, with plans to attack them. Many of the council's ideas need legislation, and thus the cooperation of a Legislature stalled by re-election campaigns, budget disagreements and a tussle between Wilson and Assembly Speaker Willie Brown for the upper hand in the Statehouse. Brown, D-San Francisco, said yesterday that he'll reserve comment on the council's report until this summer, when an economic report by Democrats is finished.

Senate President Pro Tempore David Roberti, D-Hollywood, said the report sounded "productive ... but that doesn't mean I agree with everything in it." But a leader of the Democrats' economic study team, Assemblyman John Vasconcellos of Santa Clara, called the report "ambitious and constructive."

Vasconcellos is one of the Assembly's liberal Democrats, and a potential obstacle to some of the workers' compensation reforms suggested in the report and long promoted by Wilson. It is noteworthy that lawmakers in the past have pushed some of the council's pro-business ideas, with little success. The council's plea that lawmakers can best help business by reforming California's expensive workers' compensation system, for instance, is old news in the Capitol. Less than a year ago, Wilson struggled to make workers prove that their jobs were at least 50 percent responsible for mental-stress claims they filed to get workers' compensation benefits.

Democrats -- Speaker Brown especially -- would not allow it. But with 333,000 jobs lost last year and economic upheavals that include corporate downsizing and declines in defense spending, lawmakers may be ready for more compromise than the public saw last year, said Wilson spokesman Bill Livingstone. "At that time, fewer people believed the state was in such straits," Livingstone said.

"Since then, the Democrats have created their own business task force and there is agreement that we need to protect jobs." Lawmakers and Capitol staffers repeated that thought yesterday, adding that news of jobs leaving the state