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Governor: State should not stray from TABOR

By Alex C. Pasquariello

Gov. Bill Owens brought local businesspeople and leaders a piece of his reality Monday, emphasizing Colorado should not stray from the Taxpayers' Bill of Rights.

Speaking at the Castle Rock Economic Development Council's "Lunch with the Governor," Owens highlighted improvements in Colorado's economy and discussed issues surrounding the state's budget shortfalls. He stressed the importance of using reality, not perception, to drive future decisions.

"Public policy is best structured with facts, not perception," Owens said. "We have to know where Colorado is in order to know where we should go."

The economic development council, known as CREDCO, is a consortium of local businesses working to ensure a healthy, growing economy in the Castle Rock area. Monday's luncheon drew a crowd of about 250, including Rep. Tom Tancredo of the 6th Congressional District, which includes Castle Rock. "The governor's speech was very encouraging," CREDCO Chairman Al Block said. "The State is in better condition, and the budget and employment are in better condition, than we often hear about."

Lawyer Jim Folkestad said he always enjoys listening to Owens. "He's an amazing speaker and he

has an amazing command of the facts."

TABOR, a state constitutional amendment, places a tight cap on all state expenditures, limiting increases in per-capita state expenditures to a formula based on population growth and inflation. It also requires voters to approve all tax increases.

However, TABOR directly conflicts with Amendment 23, which requires annual spending increases on K-12 education.

After ending the legislative session May 5 without reforming the amendments, state lawmakers fear they may have to cut about \$254 million from state services and programs next year.

TABOR helped Colorado's economy remain exceptionally strong during the 1990s and will see the state through as it emerges from a recession that hit the entire nation, Owens said.

But Amendment 23 makes no allowances for bad years and, since K-12 accounts for 40 percent of the state budget, it drains money from the state when revenues are down, he said.

Despite failures of the recent legislative session, Owens remained upbeat about the state's finances.

"Colorado is in good shape," he said. "I am very optimistic about where we are going."

CREDCO also is optimistic about Castle Rock's economy.

"Reality is good for Castle Rock," Block said after the luncheon. "Retail sales are up and new business continues to come to our town." Retail sales in Castle Rock totaled \$697.2 million in 2003, a 75 percent surge since 1996 according to CREDCO figures.

The number of businesses in the town grew, to 2,040 in 2003 from just over 1,600 in 2002, with 35 percent located in downtown Castle Rock.

"The increase in local business growth tells me that people see Castle Rock as a strong investment," Block said.

Castle Rock Mayor Ray Waterman remained more guarded, noting much work must still be done. "Things are looking better," he said. "We are off to a good start."

Owens was excited to see how the Castle Rock community works together to foster economic growth.

"Douglas County has done a wonderful job creating livable communities for Colorado," he said after the luncheon. "It can be difficult to balance the tradition of established communities with the needs of new arrivals in places experiencing as much growth as Douglas County."

"It is neat to see Castle Rock and Douglas County meeting that challenge by bringing communities, government and the private sector together to create smart economic growth," he said.
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