

Lawmakers advance ENDOW bills

- [By Joel Funk Wyoming Tribune Eagle Via Wyoming News Exchange](#)
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CHEYENNE - Leadership in the Wyoming Legislature advanced several bills related to a broad initiative to diversify the state's economy in recent days, but it seems clear those measures won't simply coast through the legislative process.

ENDOW - standing for Economically Needed Diversity Options for Wyoming - is Gov. Matt Mead's plan to diversify the state's economy during the next 20 years. The plan for implementing a wide array of strategic measures includes policy changes and, perhaps most difficult in Wyoming, hefty public investment.

On Saturday and Tuesday, the Wyoming Legislature's Management Council - which includes Senate President Eli Bebout, R-Riverton, House Speaker Steve Harshman, R-Casper, as well as minority party leaders - pushed through several bills reflecting the ENDOW Executive Council's priorities.

But given the complex nature of the legislation required to move the strategies forward, it's all being done relatively quickly. The Executive Council first met in summer 2017 with only a few months to develop a preliminary report due by Dec. 31. That left only around six weeks to make the priorities outlined in that report manifest in legislation.

On Tuesday night, the Management Council put in hours working through two bills line by line, resulting in lawmakers picking the proposals apart as agency representatives also expressed some concerns.

The first would establish the Wyoming workforce development-priority economic sector partnership program, meant to provide funding for workforce training programs through agreements with employers, colleges and state agencies. The other would provide matching funds to help startups and entrepreneurs access capital that's not accessible in Wyoming's private sector.

It's anything but easy, and though they draw from strategies implemented in other states, tailoring them to Wyoming proved challenging Tuesday.

Perhaps the hardest sell in the workforce development proposal to Wyoming's overwhelmingly conservative Legislature would be the bill's \$20 million appropriation from the state's strategic investments and projects account, or SIPA.

Bebout proposed an amendment to take out the appropriation altogether, instead transferring \$1.5 million appropriated in the 2017 ENDOW bill that hasn't been spent.

Any actual investment in workforce development would have to wait until ENDOW releases a report in August outlining the targeted industry sectors that would drive the direction of any workforce training investment. Bebout said it would be prudent to walk before running as it approaches its workforce development goals.

But Harshman said part of the idea for the appropriation is to show potential investors Wyoming is ready to have skin in the game.

"(It) sends signals out that Wyoming is open for business; we're going down the ENDOW path," he said.

Harshman conceded to a suggestion by Senate Minority Leader Chris Rothfuss, D-Laramie, that the Legislature could start with a smaller amount.

The council amended the bill to appropriate \$3.5 million from SIPA to be combined with the \$1.5 million transfer. The bill's final version passed unanimously.

The startup bill didn't include an appropriation, but did include an assumption that there would be \$25 million available for the programming from the state's Permanent Mineral Trust Fund. This also seemed pre-emptive to Rep. Mike Greear, R-Worland, who proposed an amendment to remove that assumption.

"All we're saying is, 'Bring a plan,'" Greear said. "I'd just as soon not throw a bill out on the floor that says, 'We're looking to spend \$25 million out of the Permanent Mineral Trust Fund.' Just bring a plan on what we'd do."

In addition to making it more palatable to the heavily conservative Legislature that already has its hesitations about public investments in diversification, Harshman said it could free it up to a higher level of investment after a plan is developed.

"You could bring plans for \$5 (million), \$25 (million), \$50 (million)," he said. "I think you could show us a whole range. When you see that \$25 million in there, it will confuse the floor. They think it's spending and not an investment vehicle."

The second bill also passed unanimously in its final form.

Those two bills join measures related to ENDOW that passed during Saturday's Management Council meeting. One covering several broad measures and another relating to telecommunication services are both heading to the Senate, where they'll need a two-thirds vote for introduction.