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Opening Remarks, Montana Economic Development Summit

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Good afternoon.

Welcome to the Montana Economic Development Summit.

Wow! Look at this crowd. I understand there are more than 1,000 people here today. That’s great. It’s good to see so many people who share my concern about such an important topic – Montana’s future.

Let me first thank all the folks here at the University of Great Falls. Especially to Dr. Fred Gilliard. And also to Kim Falcon, who really helped pull this together. We really appreciate you and the university having all of us here today. They’ve done an amazing job. Let’s give them a hand.
I'm also so glad that Conrad Burns is here. I know we both agree that this is the most important issue facing Montana today. And it reaches beyond party politics. Conrad is a leader in the Senate on so many issues, especially technology and telecommunications.

Unfortunately, Rick Hill and Marc Racicot were unable to attend -- in person. But we’ll hear a message from both of them -- Marc later today and Rick tomorrow.

Today we’re here to begin drawing a road map for Montana’s economic future. To close the Economic Divide. Over the next day and a half, we’re going work on ways to bring good-paying jobs to Montana. And ways to help the businesses that are here to grow and prosper.
We all know that our state ranks at or near the bottom in national economic rankings. And we're first in the nation in folks holding more than one job to make ends meet. That really ticks me off.

But this is more important than pride. More important than politics. This is about putting food on the table. Sending our kids to school and college. Owning our own homes. And creating good-paying jobs in Montana so our kids don't have to leave home to find work.

Today, we have an opportunity to begin to put in place the building blocks to improve Montana's economy. Create good-paying jobs. We need to begin to turn the corner. To start moving Montana forward.
We in Montana are fortunate. Our strong work ethic is one-of-a-kind -- everywhere I go people are truly impressed by it.

We have a great quality of life.

Wide open spaces.

Clean air and water.

Safe communities.

And a strong sense of our cultural heritage.

But as we boost our economy, we must make sure that we protect our quality of life – it’s second to none.

We have all these admirable traits. But one is missing -- a strong, vibrant economy. It’s no one person’s fault. And no one person is going to fix it.
Today, and over the coming years, we have an opportunity to map out our destiny. To improve our economy -- by working TOGETHER!

Some good things ARE happening in Montana. Like U.S. West providing a new high-speed Internet network in Montana. And the University of Montana building a research and development enterprise that will incubate high-tech businesses. Montana State University building the growing high-tech sector in Bozeman. And right here in Great Falls, folks are planning a downtown High-Tech Park.

Even with these great initiatives, we still need to coordinate -- a fancy word for working together. The right hand must know what the left hand is doing. Sometimes our large state works for us, and sometimes it works against us.
We're all Montanans -- we need to work together to move Montana into the New Economy.

The goal today and tomorrow is not to solve the state's economic woes here in one meeting. [Pause] That's an important point. Rather, our goal is to sit down and work together to begin finding long-term solutions to get those good-paying jobs.

Some of the greatest minds in Montana are sitting in this room. They come from all walks of life.

From the public and private sectors.

We have guests from all over the country.

Even though this is our problem, and we'll find the solution, we should listen and learn from people who are successful.
No need to reinvent the wheel. We've got folks here from states that have encountered obstacles similar to our own. They can help us, and we can learn from them.

But any plan to truly improve our economy must come from Montanans -- It's got to be a Montana-made solution. Only those who live and work here know what we can and can't do. Our strengths and our weaknesses. It will only be from our hard work – working together – that we can bring about change.

You know, when we first started getting ready for this summit, I held listening sessions across the state -- from Sidney to Missoula. We gathered people from the business community, tribes, local government and just plain interested folks. To get local and regional thoughts and ideas. I wanted to be sure the agenda clearly addresses our needs.
While these listening sessions brought up a number of issues, three points came up time and time again:

1) High-tech
2) Businesses development
3) And Marketing

Over the next day and a half, we will discuss each of these. Broadly in the roundtables and more specifically in the breakout sessions. It’s our goal at the breakout sessions to develop five or six concrete ideas for improving our economy. There will be a facilitator to maintain the focus of finding solutions.

The mission of each breakout is to generate solid ideas that will ultimately create good-paying jobs in Montana.
NOW, JUST A FEW GROUND RULES

FIRST:

Please listen. It’s important that everyone’s viewpoint is heard. But we must also listen and be open to new ideas. You may not agree with everything you hear. I may not agree with everything I hear. But everyone deserves to be heard.

SECOND:

We all have a pretty good idea of what the state’s problems are. That’s why we’re here. Let’s focus on where our economy is going, how together we can boost our state in national rankings.
How we -- together -- can boost our state in national rankings.

How we -- together -- can create good-paying jobs that keep our kids in the state.

THIRD:

Please, no finger pointing. No one is to blame. We're all in this together.

FOURTH:

We can't possibly cover everything. We only have a day and a half here. Every issue ties into economic development in some fashion. Unfortunately, there are important issues that we will not have time to address. Such as housing and health care.
FIFTH:

This summit is about the future of Montana, not partisan politics. It’s essential we keep the discussion about creating good-paying jobs in Montana -- not politics.

SIXTH:

Let’s be realistic. There is no silver bullet to this problem. We’re not going to walk out of here on Monday night with a brand new plan to solve the state’s economic problems. This summit depends on our ability as Montanans to FOLLOW UP on the good ideas and suggestions we discuss here today and tomorrow. Follow up is key.

We ARE going to walk out of here with:

An exposure to many new ideas.

A better understanding of each other.
And a road map -- a sense -- of where we need to go.

[PAUSE]

It’s fitting being in Great Falls to think of Lewis and Clark. When Lewis and Clark were sent this way on their historic journey, they were told to document the unknown (to them). Pave the way for the rest of our new country.

Just like them, we are charged with the task of forging ahead. Mapping the way for future generations.

To steal a phrase, The best way to predict the future is to create it. This is our goal.