



Getting Things Done

An Interview with The Honorable Steve Bullock, Governor of Montana

EDITORS' NOTE Steve Bullock, Montana's former attorney general, was elected Montana's 24th governor in November of 2012. As part of his efforts to bring better jobs to the state, Bullock launched the Main Street Montana Project. Through this project, he created the first ever business plan for Montana, by Montanans. This plan aims to leverage the state's strengths to help businesses expand and increase wages.



The Hon. Steve Bullock

Bullock also created the Equal Pay for Equal Work Task Force to identify and fix the causes of pay inequity in the state. In his first legislative session, Bullock was able to secure a tuition freeze at Montana colleges and universities, preventing the tax of higher tuition from hitting working Montana families. In addition, Bullock has secured historic levels of funding for the state's elementary, middle, and high schools and secured the first-ever state investment in high-quality early childhood education. In his efforts to make state government more effective and transparent, during his first month in office Bullock put the state's checkbook online so Montana residents can see how their tax dollars are being spent. Bullock received his undergraduate degree from Claremont McKenna College and his law degree with honors from Columbia University Law School in New York.

Will you touch on the current state of Montana's economy and your focus on creating jobs?

We have more Montanans working in our state than ever before. We lead the nation in manufacturing growth, unemployment is well below the national average and our wage growth is fourth highest in the nation. We're also building apprenticeship, work-based learning at a level that is much higher than most states.

When I talk with job creators across the state, I hear that their biggest challenge to growth isn't our tax system – we have the sixth best overall tax climate for businesses. The biggest challenge is making sure they have talented trade workers to fill the jobs that they need. We have put focus on that and started looking differently at training workers.

Ours is the first administration to say the objective isn't always about a four-year or

two-year degree. We have to fundamentally reshape curricula because, many times, what is necessary to fill a position is a recognized two-year professional certificate. This training not only gives the workers the skills they need to get better paying jobs, but also gives the employer the confidence that they're hiring someone with the exact skill set and credentials that are necessary.

While Montana is still recognized for its natural resource economy, we're also becoming a real hub of innovation and knowledge-based industries.

What is the key to impacting education reform?

Different areas of the country might have different challenges, but in a state like ours the focus is on the public education system. We must be able to demonstrate that we can innovate within that system.

As policy leaders, we have to recognize that the most important thing we can do is make sure that the next generation is getting a high-quality education and that we're pushing innovation into schools. At the local level, the most important thing for parents is having an accurate understanding of what they're going to get out of their schools.

We know that enhancing the quality of our K-12 system is not going to come from D.C.; it's going to come from the local districts and the policymakers on the ground.

We know that kids who aren't kindergarten ready rarely catch up. In the past few years, Montana has made major investments in early childhood education.

How important is maintaining transparency within your government to build the trust of the state's citizens?

One of the first things I did when I took office was to put the state's checkbook online so our citizens can see how their tax dollars are being spent. The need for transparency in government extends even beyond the executive and legislative branches. It also extends into the way our political system works in terms of elections. We must make sure that people know who is trying to influence our overall elections. With a legislature that is almost two-thirds Republican, we passed one of the most progressive campaign finance laws in our nation. It requires that

anyone spending money in our elections must disclose where that money comes from and how it is spent.

Making sure Montanans have confidence in government requires that they are able to see the source and destination of money being spent on elections.

What efforts have you put into the issue of pay equality in the workplace?

Shortly after I came into office, I formed an Equal Pay for Equal Work Task Force, because families succeed when working women are paid equally.

The Equal Pay Act was passed 60 years ago, but women still only earn 75 cents on the dollar compared to men, so there are additional steps we must take, some which are legislative and some cultural.

We have instituted pay negotiation training at both the college level and at the jobs service level because we know that women are less likely to negotiate their wages than men are. We need to make sure that we have family-friendly policies that allow women to get into the workforce in a way that will be most productive for the employer and for them.

We still need to fully address transparency issues, which we haven't necessarily tackled at the local or state level.

This is not just a feel-good measure either; it's really important for the business community.

Should people feel optimistic about the opportunity for change at the local level?

There should be optimism, but also the recognition that we must expect more out of Washington, D.C. Most Americans aren't partisan – most people want the same things: a safe community, good schools, a roof over their heads, clean air and water, a decent job, and the belief that their kids and grandkids can do even better.

If that is what we're focusing on, we can find a lot more commonality. My primary focus has been on getting things done in Montana. We haven't grown government, but we've invested in the priorities of the citizens of Montana.

Governors don't just get to make political statements; we're on the front lines and must get things done. The way we do that is by including others, including some that may not agree with us, in the process of moving meaningful policy ahead. That is what Americans expect. ●