# A vision for a more effective espc

Chris Merrill, Executive Director | August 22, 2019

#### The Equality State Policy Center’s mission is to improve the lives of all Wyoming’s people through transparent government, fair elections, and thriving communities.

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## Why ESPC’s Mission Is Essential

### Transparent government

is the foundation of a healthy, functioning, durable democracy. We envision a Wyoming where the government is more open, more equitable, and more responsive to its people. A transparent government is essential to achieving this vision.

#### What are the benefits of transparent government?

1. **Transparency builds trust and encourages public participation. Public input is a fundamental ingredient of good government.**
2. **Transparency is essential for keeping elected officials and government agencies accountable to the people they work for.**
3. **Transparency allows for a free and open competition of ideas.** **This leads to better, more informed, timelier, and more forward-looking policy decisions that benefit more people.**
4. **Transparency is necessary to enable the public to provide robust and continuous feedback, information, ideas, and analysis.**
5. **Transparency is healthy. It helps us tap into the immense collective knowledge, experience, creativity, and expertise of the people. This is possible only when the people know what the government is up to and what policies lawmakers are considering.**

### Fair Elections

are the most basic and direct way that we the people exercise our power over the government and, as a result, protect our rights as citizens and bring about policies that benefit the people.

**In Wyoming (and in the rest of the United States) we live in a representative democracy where all citizens are constitutionally guaranteed the same civil rights.** This system ensures that the ultimate **power rests with the people**, not with the government. **The most basic way we demonstrate this power is through regular, democratic elections.**

#### What are some of your essential rights as citizens and voters?

* Freedom of speech, association, and assembly—including the freedom to protest.
* Due process and equal protection under the law.
* Freedom to organize and mobilize groups of people for the purposes of civic action and engagement.
* Freedom to participate in political dialogues, debates, and conversations.
* Equal opportunities to participate in our government and our economy.
* The right to register to vote, if eligible, and the freedom to cast your vote in secret, for whomever you choose, without fear of intimidation or reprisals, and with the guarantee that your vote will be counted.

#### If we’re guaranteed fair elections by law, then what’s the problem? Why are fair elections central to ESPC’s mission?

* Voter suppression is a real phenomenon that hurts the functioning of our democracy.
* Without constant vigilance from citizens, our legally guaranteed freedoms and protections can be (1) misunderstood by poll workers and government officials; (2) willfully or ignorantly violated by government officials; (3) ignored due to prejudice and bias; and/or (4) slowly eroded over time.
* Our de-facto two-party political system is not perfect—the two mainstream parties can (and do) create onerous rules and unfair barriers to entry for new or different political parties or ideologies. These barriers can unfairly crowd out other voices and make it unreasonably difficult to get on the ballot or included on equal footing in debates and elections.

#### What does ESPC want to achieve in Wyoming’s elections?

* We want to bring about—and maintain—a system of elections that gives all eligible voters equal opportunities to register to vote, to change political party affiliation, to unaffiliate altogether, and to do these things if and when they see fit.
* We want to ensure that poll workers and government officials are well trained and well versed in election law and in our constitutionally guaranteed rights—with an emphasis on upholding the freedoms and protections of all voters.
* We want to ensure that all votes are counted equally, and that announced election results match the actual vote totals.

### Thriving Communities

* **are fair communities.** They offer a wide range of economic and civic opportunities for their residents regardless of ancestry, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or any other superficial or cultural differences. They provide equal opportunities to participate in government and the economy. They ensure free and fair elections.
* **are just communities.** Equal outcomes can never be guaranteed, but equal opportunities and equal treatment under the law can be. Justice is achieved when all community members receive equal treatment and due process under the law and have equal opportunities to flourish.
* **are free communities.** They ensure freedom of speech and freedom of religion. They support our constitutional rights to assemble, protest, speak our minds, and form private associations—including religious congregations, clubs, civic organizations, labor unions, charities, advocacy groups, social support organizations, addiction recovery and support groups, and other support services for those in need.
* **are healthy communities.** They maintain a healthy environment for all their residents, including clean air and safe drinking water. They provide access to high-quality health care—including mental health services—regardless of ancestry, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or any other superficial or cultural differences.
* **invest in their children and families.** They provide equal access to high-quality education; maintain a social safety net and social services for people in need; and offer safe, reliable, and affordable childcare for working parents.
* **focus on quality of life.** They create a wide variety of opportunities for self-education and improvement, community gatherings and events, outdoor recreation, athletics, exercise, creative expression, and engagement in the arts.
* **educate, attract, and retain people of all ages.**
* **provide the infrastructure needed for the economy to flourish.**

#### What about jobs? What about economic diversification?

**Wyoming needs to finally escape the boom-and-bust, “natural resource curse” economy. We can do this by focusing on infrastructure and people.**

**Successful modern economies all have two things in common:**

**(1) high-quality, well-maintained, state-of-the-art infrastructure and**

**(2) educated, well-trained people.**

**(1) Infrastructure:** If a modern economy were a body, infrastructure would be its muscles, bones, vital organs, and systems.

* **Physical infrastructure** (including roads, airports, a power grid, telecommunications networks, and internet) enables trade, creates opportunities for new economic activity and development, and connects workers to their jobs. Good infrastructure increases an economy’s productivity while also creating its own jobs in technical, construction, building, engineering, and maintenance fields. More than 10 percent of U.S. workers nationwide have jobs directly related to building and maintaining the nation’s physical infrastructure.
* **Social infrastructure** (including education and training, health and sanitation services, and clean drinking water) indirectly increases an economy’s productivity over time, while also creating its own associated jobs and new opportunities.

**(2) People:** Although good infrastructure is a necessary condition for a thriving economy, it’s not enough. **People make the modern economy go. People are the creative, dynamic, diversifying force.**

#### What do people have to do with diversifying the economy?

* **People—if given opportunities and access to education—are the engine of any modern economy.**
* **People are essential to achieving vibrant, thriving, resilient communities.**
* **People are creative and entrepreneurial.** People take entrepreneurial risks, develop new ideas, start new businesses, and create new markets and new economic opportunities wherever they go.
* **People are generous, gracious, caring, service-oriented, and civic minded—**and these folks volunteer, give locally, and make their communities better in countless ways, wherever they happen to live.
* **People are brilliant, energetic, talented, artistic, visionary, and hard-working.** They breathe life and new ideas into their cities and towns wherever they live, and they help make their communities more adaptable and more responsive to change, and more resilient to economic shocks and downturns.
* **Enough people—given opportunities, quality education, equal protections, and equal rights—will inevitably create a diverse, self-sustaining, and durable economy all on their own.**

#### Thriving communities in Wyoming: how do we get there from here?

* **As a state:**
  + Focus on educating, attracting, and retaining people.
* **As leaders serious about economic diversification:**
  + Get off the boom-and-bust economic rollercoaster. Modernize our tax structure so that education, infrastructure, and other essential funding isn’t subject to the whims of commodities markets. Invest in developing and maintaining state-of-the-art infrastructure.
* **As citizens and residents:**
  + Invest in our own government and education system by engaging with school boards, community colleges, and the University of Wyoming. **Support a state income tax!** If we’re going to escape the “resource curse,” we’ll need to stop relying on the oil, gas, and coal industries to fund public education and other essential government services. **If the public wants to have political power, we’ll need to have skin in the game. We’ll need to pay our fair share. Once the Legislature relies more heavily on the people for revenues, it’ll be much more responsive to our goals and aspirations for this state.** We need to ask lawmakers to modernize the state’s tax structure and revenue streams, invest in infrastructure, advocate equal access to high-quality education; support a social safety net and social services for people in need; and help ensure that our local communities offer safe, reliable, and affordable childcare for working parents.
* **As elected officials:**
  + Recognize that our current, overreliance on the energy industry is a dead end—and take leadership roles in (1) explaining this fact to the public, (2) modernizing the state’s tax structure and revenue streams, and (3) presenting an achievable vision for a brighter future where Wyoming is no longer caught in the boom-and-bust trap.
* **As voters:**
  + Elect leaders willing take on this difficult work.
* **As political party leaders, advocates, and voters across the political spectrum:**
  + Elect a State Legislature that is more diverse and is a better reflection of the people and population of Wyoming.
* **As non-partisan advocates:**
  + Help a more diverse range of candidates throughout the political spectrum learn about what it takes to run a successful campaign for elected office in Wyoming, while helping regular people who don’t have the opportunity to run for office to effectively monitor and engage with their government and legislators.
* **As civic-minded community members:**
  + Helpour cities and towns be fair, just, free, and healthy, while investing in children and families, and focusing on the quality of life we offer our residents.
* **As policymakers:**
  + **Invest** in education and attracting and retaining people. Ensure that everyone has equal opportunities to participate in our government and economy.

# What would A more effective ESPC accomplish?

1. We’d help **change the face of the Legislature** while **changing the conversation** about public policy and diversifying Wyoming's economy.
2. We’d help convince legislators and voters to **modernize the tax structure and focus on quality of life** in Wyoming’s cities and towns.
3. We’d articulate and successfully advocate an achievable vision for bringing about **thriving communities** and a brighter future for Wyoming.

## What would be the Big-picture focus for the next five-to-ten years?

### Thriving Communities. Embracing Diversity.

* If Wyoming wants to diversify its economy, we will need to work together to attract and retain community members who are dynamic, entrepreneurial, energetic, creative, and community minded.
  + This is how a modern, diversified economy emerges.
  + **People make a modern economy go.**
  + **You need a diversity of people with a diversity of strengths.**
* **In order to attract and retain people, Wyoming's communities will need to:** 
  + **Focus on quality of life.**
  + **Foster a culture that is not merely tolerant of differences but that actively embraces, understands, promotes, and defends diversity.**
* **A culture that embraces diversity will be a basic prerequisite of economic success in the future.** Wyoming voters need to understand this if we don't already.

## what would our core program work be?

1. Fostering, advocating, and improving civic engagement in Wyoming year-round—inspiring, mobilizing, and harnessing the power of the people consistently, throughout the state, and throughout the year.

2. Changing the face of the Legislature—inspiring and assisting as many people as possible to run for office—especially women, young people, and people from traditionally underrepresented communities—with an emphasis on people who share our values and who could replace legislators who need to be replaced. (There might be some tricky tax-status territory to navigate here . . . but I believe it's nonetheless navigable. We could consider, as an organization, if it makes sense for us to create a "c4" arm to our operations.)

3. Changing the conversation—saying what needs to be said throughout the year. Filling ongoing (unacceptable) gaps in the public discourse and in legislative committee meetings related to how policies affect women and girls, children, laborers, people of color, and other traditionally underrepresented and marginalized communities.

## What would our staff look like?

1. **A full-time staff person dedicated to fostering and advocating civic engagement,** organizing and offering multiple (3-4) SHAPE WY trainings per year in different regions of the state, consistently reaching out to the public with timely information, education, and analysis, managing ESPC’s social media and community engagement platforms, managing our database of supporters and advocates, tracking donations, and moving people up the ladder of engagement.
2. **A full-time staff person dedicated to changing the face of the Legislature.** Promoting and offering multiple RUN WY trainings every year (2-3), while consistently reaching out to the public throughout the year with timely information, education, and analysis related to running for office; identifying and inspiring potential candidates and connecting them with the resources they need while inspiring them to run—with an emphasis on women, young people, and people from traditionally underrepresented communities. Helping identify and connect candidates and potential candidates—who we believe share our values and would help fulfill ESPC's vision for Wyoming—with donors and the c4 resources they'll need to run successful campaigns.
3. **At least one full-time staff person dedicated to high-level, timely, policy analysis that fills current, unacceptable gaps in the public conversation and in legislative committee meetings** related to how policies and proposed policies affect women and girls, children in general, laborers, people of color, and other traditionally underrepresented and marginalized communities. This work would include consistent communications and outreach to the public (both grassroots and grasstops), providing timely information, education, and analysis, and would likely require the capacity for high-level communications, media relations, and the ability to produce a steady stream of compelling written content for legislators/the website/blog/Op-Ed pages/the media.
4. A full-time staff member (likely the executive director) dedicated to engaging with the Legislature and individual legislators throughout the year as ESPC's full-time lobbyist, watch-dogging and engaging legislators and legislative committees, carrying the big-picture vision for the organization, jealously guarding the ESPC brand, assisting and leading the staff always in pursuit of ESPC's mission, running the organization, managing finances, working with the board, and consistently sharing the story of the mission, vision, goals, and accomplishments of the organization to donors and potential donors. This person will most likely also be the chief fundraiser and grant writer for ESPC, at least in the short term.
5. **A full-time staff member dedicated to visionary, strategic communications and development.** Assisting and supporting the entire staff, including the executive director, as a go-to writer and editor for all manner of ESPC communications and content including compelling written content for emails, the website, blog, social media, Op-Ed pages, advocacy, education, and fundraising materials.

## What would it take to accomplish this vision in terms of budget and board function?

### Budget

* **At least $396,000 per year** (see the attached spreadsheet, which shows a comparison between ESPC's board-approved 2019 budget vs. a proposed budget for accomplishing this vision), **requiring about $275,000 of new annual funding.**
* **With a proposed three-year transition to this budget:**
  + **Year One**
    - **Drop the NPPC grant ($20K)** and find replacement funding that better supports our mission.
    - **Add $70,000 of new funding** to begin implementing our new Changing the Conversation program.
    - **This would increase ESPC’s total budget from $146,000 annually to $216,000.**
  + **Year Two**
    - Build on the momentum and success of our new Changing the Conversation program by **adding $80,000 of new funding, expanding our Civic Engagement program, and adding the strategic communications and development professional to the team.**
    - **This would increase ESPC’s total budget from $216,000 annually to about $296,000.**
  + **Year Three**
    - Build on the momentum and success of our Changing the Conversation and the vision of our Changing the Face of the Legislature program by **adding $100,000 of new funding and beginning implementation of our Changing the Face of the Legislature program.**
    - **This would increase ESPC’s total budget from $296,000 annually to about $396,000.**

### Board Function

* Providing sound governance and oversight.
* Consistently recruiting and attracting a more diverse range of board members who can take over, pick up these torches for a while, and then, in turn, recruit and bring in new energy, new faces, new perspectives, and new wisdom, wealth, and work.
* Contributing a mix of:
  + Wisdom
  + Wealth
  + Work

## Who would be involved and where would we find the resources and people?

GBS Foundation, Jen Simon, the Jackson network of progressives, the Cheyenne network of progressives, unions, our traditional coalition allies, small donors and major donors, new donors. Progressive funders in general. National organizations. Other potential grant-makers? Help!

## Would a different organizational structure be required for ESPC to achieve this vision?

* **ESPC's current coalition model and board structure is unique in Wyoming and is a great and important tradition in this state.** The coalition structure has many strengths—chief among them is the solidarity it helps build across a wide range of social justice, conservation, and labor groups. And thanks to a legacy started by ESPC's founder, Sarah Gorin—and then continued by a succession of intelligent, strategic, insightful, and talented staff—the organization's "brand" is in excellent shape. While not well-known among the general public, ESPC is broadly respected and taken seriously by legislators, government agencies, and decision-makers, and is influential at the Legislature and in the governor's office.
* **This structure also has its drawbacks.** The board, collectively, provides a great deal of wisdom. But—because board members also tend to be executive directors or other high-level employees at their own respective organizations—the board’s collective capacity to provide work and wealth is relatively minimal (as compared to a more standard volunteer nonprofit board). None of our board members are likely to be major philanthropists and/or be independently wealthy. It’s also not uncommon for our board members’ organizations to be “competing” with each other (and ESPC) for the same fundraising dollars—or at least for support from the same group of families and foundations. And the board’s relative limitations when it comes to providing wealth to ESPC is especially challenging if we were to seriously pursue growing the budget and adding staff as envisioned in this document. Under the current board structure, we can’t identify and ask philanthropists and other potential donors and contributors who are passionate about our mission to consider board service. This is an important (and some might argue essential) way that a more traditionally structured nonprofit organization brings in new perspectives, adds new layers of wisdom to the board, expands the organization’s reach and recognition, and taps into new and broader networks of donors and activists. This kind of board-driven growth is currently unavailable to ESPC. Another drawback of the current structure is that it renders the concept of term limits impractical, if not impossible. I highlight this as a challenge because establishing term limits for nonprofit board service has become a widely accepted best practice in the industry. Organizations commonly set a limit of four-to-six consecutive years of board service with the possibility of serving again after a mandatory break (often 12-24 months). They also stagger terms with the goal of turning over no more than one-third of the total board seats annually.
* **It's my opinion that ESPC could function even better—**and accomplish the growth necessary to more ambitiously pursue our mission—with a more traditional 501(c)3 structure. Or perhaps with a hybrid coalition/volunteer board. I don't make this assertion without a great deal of trepidation. I could be mistaken. But it seems to me that we would have a better chance of building capacity and accomplishing a much more ambitious pursuit of our mission if we adopted a more standard 501(c)3 structure—and especially by identifying and involving passionate, volunteer board members. With this kind of structure, we could recruit a more diverse mix of people to serve on the board and consistently bring in new people who have the time, inclination, and capacity to collectively contribute their wisdom, wealth, and work. Ideally, such a board would steadily and strategically recruit and attract new potential board members who would in turn further expand our capacity, recognition, and reach by helping us tap into new and broader networks of donors and activists.