

A cheeky request for city funds?

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It takes a lot of nerve to ask mayoral hopefuls to commit money to a new program these days, but that's what will happen Sunday when the major candidates face hundreds of citizens at an "accountability session" staged by The Metropolitan Organization.

TMO, a church-based community organization, wants \$1 million over the next three years for a new job-training program.

My bet is that most, if not all, of the candidates will take the pledge, or at least agree to try to find the money.

Outrageous? Maybe not.

The Legislature this year overwhelmingly passed and the governor signed a bill authorizing \$25 million over the next two years to encourage exactly such programs.

The legislation was sought by Republican State Comptroller Susan Combs in a study she issued last December showing a vital need to train workers for technical jobs that don't require college degrees. The Texas economy, the report said, could suffer if such training doesn't take place.

The study indicated community colleges are effective at such training.

The TMO proposal would recruit low-wage workers and give them intensive support as they go through community college training programs. The program differs from others in some key ways.

- The workers, often single parents who are struggling to stay afloat, meet regularly with a counselor and a support group. Issues of day care for their children, help with transportation and other causes of high dropout rates in standard job-training programs are dealt with.
- The program will work with the community colleges to develop special, intensive, five-day-a-week courses designed to get participants up to speed with math, reading comprehension and writing skills needed before they can succeed in college courses.
- Area employers will help students know what fields the jobs are in.

All good in theory, but can it work?

The answer is that it already does. Sister organizations of TMO established successful programs years ago and have graduated thousands of participants.

Back in 1996 Paul Osterman, a labor economist at the Sloan School of Management at MIT, published a study funded by the Ford Foundation showing the San Antonio program, Project Quest, more than doubled the average participant's income after two years or less in the program.

The result was that taxpayers received a rapid return on their investment. Participants not only started paying more taxes, but needed less in food stamps and other forms of support. What's more, the prospects for their children jumped markedly.

A national expert on job-training programs, Osterman said Thursday that the San Antonio project and Capital IDEA, an Austin program based on it, "are among the best, if not the very best, in the country."

"It's a proven model," he said. "It's not like they're taking a risk."

The highly regarded Aspen Institute is in the process of evaluating the Austin program, but lead researcher Maureen Conway, who has studied job training programs for more than a decade, says she's already seen enough to be impressed.

"They're phenomenal," she said of Austin's Capital IDEA. "The way they use their resources, invest in their staff, use technology."

TMO has already sold some key Houston players on the plan. The United Way has agreed to put up \$50,000 in matching funds. Lone Star College has pledged \$30,000 in scholarships and \$16,000 in staff time for developing curriculum. And federally funded Workforce Solutions has promised \$124,000 for child care and other services.

So is it unmitigated gall to ask for a few hundred thousand a year from the city for the next three years?

The leading candidates all support tax breaks for companies willing to move here. If that's a good investment, isn't it wise to invest in workers who would take those jobs?