



Martz's economic plan ignores needs of poor, activists say **Associated Press**

January 30, 2002

HELENA (AP) – Montana's poor need a stronger government safety net and are disregarded in Gov. Judy Martz's plan for economic development, advocates for labor and low-income people said Tuesday.

Martz rebutted the claim that issues of poverty and justice are ignored in the economic-development blueprint that she unveiled recently.

The criticism came from Frank Kromkowski of the Montana Community Labor Alliance during a Capitol news conference that low-income advocates held to announce findings from a new study on getting by in low-wage Montana.

Kromkowski called the Martz blueprint "the same old trickle-down economics that has failed us in the past."

"Right now, this bright and bold future the governor has mentioned simply isn't in the cards," he said.

Martz said her mission is to strengthen the state's economy for the benefit of all.

"We have not forgotten anyone in this plan, and we don't intend to," the Republican governor said in an interview.

On Jan. 9, she presented what she called her economic-development "framework," outlining steps Montana should take to help business, create jobs, improve education and revitalize the state's sagging economy.

She said Tuesday that although the plan may not list each economic stratum, it "speaks to every component of the people we serve in the state of Montana."

The Missoula group Working for Equality and Economic Liberation held the news

conference to showcase a University of Washington researcher's report about the amount of money it takes to be economically self-sufficient in Montana.

The report by Diana Pierce details the income necessary to maintain households of various configurations with and without assistance such as food stamps and housing subsidies.

Pierce found that in Great Falls, a single mother with one preschooler and one school-age child must earn at least \$31,142 a year to live assistance-free. The study says such a family would need \$25,475 in Dawson County; \$28,688 in Flathead County; \$26,230 in Rosebud County; and \$36,951 in Bozeman, Montana's costliest locale covered by the study.

The wages exceed average Montana pay, which the U.S. Department of Labor pegged at \$24,264 annually in 2000, the most recent figure available and the lowest among the 50 states.

That points to the need for a stronger safety net of government services, activists said Tuesday.

"I think they're probably correct," Rep. Bill Thomas, R-Hobson, chairman of the House Human Services Committee, said by telephone.

"I think the safety net is certainly controlled by the function of the money available. There is a point at which there's no more money. It's the same as the wage earner, the farmer, the rancher. We'd all like to have more. The key is economic development. We're working on it."

Martz said she had not seen the report and could not comment on its specifics, but

added that "there are times when government must step up to the table and help people ..."

Pierce's report, "The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Montana," charts the earnings necessary to pay for housing, food, childcare and other necessities. The calculations take into account the ages of children, because costs of raising children vary with their age.

Nineteen other states are covered by studies like the one on Montana, and more studies are planned.

The findings should be used to help shift public-policy debates about poverty away from the goal of simply reducing welfare caseloads, and toward helping families achieve permanent self-sufficiency, said Joan Kuriansky, executive director of Wider Opportunities for Women, an employment organization based in Washington, D.C.

Copyright 2002 Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.