



CENTRIST POLITICAL GROUP ARRIVES ON MADISON SCENE

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Andy Hall

After about six months of private talks, an eclectic mix of Madison-area leaders on Tuesday unveiled a group they hope will become a potent political force by seeking an oft-neglected niche - the middle ground.

"I do think this is a model for the rest of the nation to emulate," Peter Munoz, acting chairman of the Common Sense Coalition, said after a Downtown news conference with more than two dozen supporters, including former Madison School Board member and former mayoral candidate Ray Allen and Madison police union president Scott Favour.

The coalition says it has 4,000 members hailing from 60 small businesses, 17 labor unions, development firms and nonprofit organizations. It is applying to the Internal Revenue Service for tax-exempt status as a 501(c)4 organization, which would allow it to engage in political and lobbying activities but not to field a slate of candidates.

The coalition aims to become a public policy group that seeks centrist solutions to Dane County problems while fostering economic development, public safety and education, said Munoz, executive director of Centro Hispano, an agency serving the Hispanic community, who often is mentioned as a potential mayoral candidate.

Munoz and three other organizers of the coalition insisted their effort should be viewed as creating a reasonable venue for studying and resolving issues - not an attack on the leftist political party Progressive Dane and its most prominent member, Madison Mayor Dave Cieslewicz.

Cieslewicz's spokesman, George Twigg, said the mayor accepts that premise and welcomes "all comers to the civic debate as long as they're talking about issues and talking in a positive and constructive way." The next mayoral election is in April 2007.

Munoz, who was an aide to former Mayor Sue Bauman, said he doesn't have political aspirations but can't rule out a run for office someday "if people are calling me and, you know, convincing me that I need to step up to the plate and fill that position. . . . I'd much rather support somebody else."

The idea of forming a coalition sprang out of a research project commissioned by a client of Putnam Roby Communications. Roger Putnam, a former television journalist who

heads the firm with Tim Roby, communications director for former Gov. Scott McCallum, declined to identify the client or the focus of the research project.

"I think this coalition is something of a manifestation of the way we approach our business," Putnam said. "Tim is an unapologetic Republican and I'm a kind and gentle Democrat. And we both believe that the answer is somewhere perhaps in the middle."

Allen said the coalition will name an 11-member executive committee with seats set aside for labor, business, nonprofits and individuals, to form "a vehicle that is inclusive of all segments of the Madison community, that allows a really vetted discussion on public policy. It doesn't exist currently."

Favour said coalition organizers "saw the folks on either end not really communicating with one another and not getting a lot done without a lot of acrimony, a lot of argument."

Favour said his involvement in the coalition is fueled in part by frustration over City Hall's handling of the police union's requests for more equipment and programs, such as Tasers and canine units, and for hiring additional police officers to keep pace with population growth.

With the coalition, he said, he'll have a chance to make his case for support - and in turn, the coalition may lobby City Hall on the union's behalf.