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Lempke leads economic think tank

BY DON WALTON
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Roger Lempke, the former commanding general of the Nebraska National Guard, has a new mission.

Lempke signed on as executive director of what he describes as "a free enterprise think tank" recently formed to promote economic growth in the state.

The Platte Institute for Economic Research will be unveiled at a news conference at the Omaha Press Club on Monday.

The institute will focus initially on tax policy and government spending in Nebraska, Lempke said during a Lincoln interview.

"Nebraska has the reputation of being a high-tax state," Lempke said, particularly in terms of its local property tax burden.

The institute's first study, already being conducted by Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, is examining Nebraska's tax structure and comparing it with tax systems in bordering states.

Results of that survey, due to be published in late February or early March, will "get the debate started," Lempke said.

"We have no predetermined view."

Formation of the Platte Institute enrolls Nebraska in the State Policy Network, a

state-focused think tank community promoting free enterprise and limited government.

Initial benefactors of the Nebraska organization are Pete Ricketts, who left his position as an Ameritrade executive to enter the 2006 Senate race, and Gail Werner-Robertson, founder of the Sunshine Foundation, which supports autism programs and services.

The Platte Institute will be funded by private contributions and private grants, Lempke said.

Its mission will be to "advance public policy alternatives that foster limited government, personal responsibility and free enterprise for Nebraska," he said.

The institute will not propose specific legislation, he said, or act in a lobbying role or support political candidates. Its role is research and education, he said.

However, Lempke said, a number of the institute's studies could "set the stage for discussion" when the Legislature meets again in 2009.

Other topics on the list of initial priorities:

■ Enhancing Nebraska's educational structure.

■ Evaluating ways to control health care spending.

■ Managing Nebraska's water resources.

Lempke said the institute



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also plans to study the state's road system.

And, he said, it will "look at the entire governmental system" in Nebraska, recognizing that some critics believe the state has developed an overabundance of local governmental subdivisions.

Lempke retired from his post as adjutant general last November.

Before being named military commander of the National Guard in 2000, Lempke worked 20 years in the private sector. He was an executive at Brunswick Corp. in Lincoln.

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