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Business group antes up to support right-to-work county legal fights

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With four counties on board, efforts to pass right-to-work legislation are heating up in New Mexico.

A local business group wants to keep the heat on.

The New Mexico Business Coalition confirmed to Albuquerque Business First it will contribute \$20,000 for the legal defense of counties' decisions to implement right-to-work, which prohibits a company and a union from signing a contract that would require the affected workers to be union members. The contributions came from several businesses. A statement by the Business Coalition to ABF did not name the businesses.

Sandoval, Otero, Lincoln and most recently, Chaves counties have passed right-to-work legislation in New Mexico.



COURTESY CARLA J. SONNTAG

Carla Sonntag, president and founder of the New Mexico Business Coalition, said not having right-to-work law can be a deal-breaker when it comes to out-of-state businesses looking to expand.

Larry Sonntag, chief of staff of the coalition, told Business First his organization is not anti-union. That's a common misconception about those who support right-to-work, he said in a phone call Wednesday. Instead, he said, the group's hope is that unions raise their game to ensure employees want to join.

Carla Sonntag, president and founder of the coalition, said not having right-to-work law can be a deal-breaker for attracting out-of-state businesses.

"I've been supporting the passage of right-to-work legislation at the state level for 20 years," Carla Sonntag said in a statement. "With over 60 percent approval rating from New Mexico registered voters, it was time for a different path forward to make right-to-work a long-awaited reality in New Mexico."

Larry Sonntag said after Sandoval County passed legislation in January and unions threatened suit, the coalition began to raise money for potential legal fees. Sandoval County was sued by the New Mexico Federation of Labor.

The coalition cites Kentucky as a right-to-work success. The Bluegrass State implemented the legislation statewide in January 2017 after several counties hopped on board. Kentucky has seen over \$9 billion in corporate investments and 17,000 new jobs since it was passed, according to a release from the coalition.

A bill to implement right-to-work statewide in New Mexico flamed out in the House during last year's legislative session. Critics of right-to-work legislation have described it as a "red herring" and less important for job creation than issues like education and workforce development.

"Until officials at the state level decide they truly want to improve New Mexico's economic outlook and job opportunities, NMBC is happy to see county commissioners making bold decisions to assure they are helping working families and providing the best prospects for their constituents," Carla Sonntag said in a statement.

Larry Sonntag said the coalition will continue to raise money and contribute to a fight for right-to-work legal fees as defense is needed. He added that the New Mexico Business Coalition expects Torrance County to introduce an ordinance Wednesday.

The New Mexico Business Coalition describes itself as a statewide nonpartisan, probusiness organization and state affiliate for the National Association of Manufacturing. The coalition ended 2016 with \$218,981 in total assets, according to the organization's Form 990.

Ron Davis

Reporter

Albuquerque Business First