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Let's Talk About the Big Issues

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All signs are that Wisconsin is now plunging into its worst recession in 20 years. It's anyone's guess whether this will be a remake of the ugly "Rust Belt Recession," which continued here well after the national recession of the early 1980s had abated. But what's indisputable is that since our state recovery in the mid-'80s — that is, yes, it must be said, during the golden years of Thompson/ McCallum state government — much of our industrial competitive position has eroded and our fiscal house has been ludicrously mismanaged. This is why, as recent headlines again tell us, it's gotten so seriously out of order. So we face the economic challenge of this generation, with fewer tools to face it.

But not all the news is bad by any means. Some industries have effectively restructured to face new competition; new industries like biotech are emerging; our workers are better trained and educated, and certainly more productive, than ever before. And Wisconsin is in fact a national leader not just in throwing people off welfare rolls but in building new forms of labor-management cooperation and collaboration of the sort needed to be competitive at decent wages.

And while our winters are still cold and commuting times are getting ridiculous (another indication of our failure to deal with the sprawl that's also destroying our physical beauty), Wisconsin remains a great place, if not as spectacular a place as it once was, to raise a family. Crime is low, the schools are good, what's left of the open space is still beautiful. And, God help us, the Wisconsin spirit of innovation and clean government — the latter badly tarnished over the same period — still beats in our civic heart. So things can be turned around. But they're also pretty clearly getting serious. It's like this: We haven't fallen into an abyss yet, but we're sort of teetering on one.

Which is why the next couple of years of Wisconsin politics are so crucial. "What kind of state do we want to be, and how can we get there?" is the question that is now up for grabs, and the one that should fully occupy our politics. It should be asked of anyone now seeking public office; it should be answered by them clearly. That, in fact, should be a benchmark test of whether they're even qualified to run for office. And, to be fair and to help us realize when we're being snooked, it should also be understood and answered by ourselves. And I think this because I don't think anybody in their right mind can any longer deny that unless we up our game as a state and play more seriously with what we still have, we will indeed damage — big time — living standards and quality of life for the next generation.

Call the above - the view that this is a time of great danger, and also one of opportunity that must be aimed at to be achieved — a political position. I hold it. I invite you to hold it. I think it's a very sensible position. Indeed, on the facts, I think it's about the only sensible position. So I don't see it as particularly controversial. But I can tell you, holding it makes some people uncomfortable. They go into denial: "Ah, come on now, everything is great!" They try to shoot the messenger: "Ah, what do you know about anything! You're just a lousy professor!" They try to distort the message: "Ah, you're only looking at the negative!" — which in fact, as just stated, I'm clearly not. And so on.

So if you adopt the position too, beware: They'll do it to you too. But hey, you can take it, can't you? It's a bit like those anti- drug commercials where the kids complain about how intrusive their parents were in their teen years, how they invaded their privacy and meddled in their affairs and all, and then the kids say "thanks Dad" or "thanks Mom."

Well, Wisconsin's not our kid, but our kids do live here, don't they? And they will be grateful, I am certain, if we get seriously down to business.

Exercise One: Do you know what's really happening in the state budget? When will this recession end? What does that matter anyhow? What are our tax options, and how should we be changing, if at all, economic development strategy here?

I start with this not just because it's current, but because it sits, along with values, at the bottom of it all. Politics is "materially conditioned." What we can do as a society depends on the resources we bring to bear within it. "What is the distribution of resources now?" and "How might more be found?" are thus natural starting points in any serious political discussion.

* So let's talk about these things. Guessing here, I think it will take the next four columns. One on what's happened over the past generation. One on what happened, and recently ended, in the 1990s. One on our present economic choices in the state. One returning to the budget, but this time how to fix it.

OK? See you next week.

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a

statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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