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## Business leaders in favor of diversion form task force

FARGO – Many businesses here want the diversion project. Craig Whitney wants to get that message out to legislators here and in Washington.

By: [Erik Burgess](#), INFORUM

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FARGO – Many businesses here want the diversion project.

Craig Whitney wants to get that message out to legislators here and in Washington.

Whitney, president and chief executive officer of the Fargo Moorhead West Fargo Chamber of Commerce, is finalizing a task force comprised of area business leaders who want lawmakers to know that the proposed \$1.8 billion Fargo-Moorhead flood diversion project is vital to the business community.

"It affects commerce if we have to be closed down for a period of time for the flooding," Whitney said. "It is a severe deterrent to economic development, and it certainly can affect the retention or expansion of our business."

Whitney said the task force will not be an official Diversion Authority subcommittee. It will have about 35 members from chamber businesses small and large, but he was not ready to disclose who. The Chamber has more than 2,000 member businesses.

"It will be a diverse group," he said, adding that representatives would be from the retail, energy, technology, manufacturing and medical sectors.

Don Morton, site leader for Microsoft's south Fargo campus, said he is not on the task force, but he supports the diversion from a business perspective.

Morton said Microsoft's five-year plan here includes the possibility of adding two new buildings to its south Fargo campus, with construction starting as early as 2015.

"We would build the buildings regardless of the diversion," he said. "From a business standpoint, it just doesn't help our image if we have a disruption because of flooding every year."

Microsoft's Fargo site closed for 10 days during the 2009 flood so its employees could join the community in the flood fight. Despite near-annual flooding, the company is "committed to growing in Fargo," Morton said.

Whitney notified the Diversion Authority on Thursday that he was corralling the new task force. The group's first meeting will likely be on Feb. 26.

These business leaders are expected to testify before state legislators in Bismarck and members of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Fargo Mayor Dennis Walaker said he has been searching for a "champion" in the business community for some time to best explain and demonstrate how major flooding affects economic growth and jobs.

"Sure there's the oil and so forth, but the Red River Valley has been supporting the state for an awfully long time," Walaker said. "This project (the diversion) is viable to the economy of North Dakota, as far as I'm concerned."

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