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OKLAHOMA ACADEMY FOR STATE GOALS PURSUES STATE IMPROVEMENT

■(GIT) Julie Conaster is late, a last-minute lunch with the board chairman of the Oklahoma Academy for State Goals having run longer than she had anticipated.

The pace with which she enters her downtown Oklahoma City office — fast — seems familiar. It probably is. As executive director for the state's only non-partisan think tank and catalyst organization, Julie Conaster has a lot to do.

The group's mission statement says a lot about the organization — billing it as a broad-based, statewide organization dedicated to building consensus upon which programs and policies can be built that develop our state's human and material resources to their fullest potential — but not hardly enough at the same time.



When Bellmon returned to the governor's office nearly 20 years later, the academy had become inactive. He revived it and soon after its resurrection, Conaster was hired to be the organization's executive director.

The group is strictly voluntary, said Conaster, and is made up of people from all walks of life. Its membership list is some 33 pages long, including some of the most well-known names in Oklahoma and others most have never heard.

"We're very diverse," Conaster said, "and our membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the future and well-being of Oklahoma."

Another important element of the academy is its political ties — It has none, making it one of only six nonpartisan, consensus building, catalyst organizations in the country.

"That is one of the things people find so appealing," Conaster said. "We don't have ties to any one political group or philosophy. In fact, I can't even tell you the political affiliation of most of our members. It never comes up. That's not what we're about."

RENEWING OKLAHOMA'S RESOURCES

Last year, the Oklahoma Academy for State Goals celebrated its tenth anniversary, or twelfth, depending on how you look at things, says Conaster, the group's only executive director to date.

During his first term as governor, Henry Bellmon got the idea for the academy's creation after participating in a similar group in Arizona. That group lasted only two years, but its impact, Conaster said, is still felt today.

"They worked primarily on judicial reform," she said, "and were instrumental in changing the state's judicial structure into what we have today."

WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

Like its mission statement says, the academy aims at "consensus building upon which programs and policies can be built that develop our state's human and material resources to their fullest potential."

How is that done? It's a question Conaster seems to like answering.

The state, she explains, is divided into six regional groups — The two metropolitan areas and four regions. Those groups gather in the spring to identify issues they would like to see considered by the academy. The regional groups must not only pick an issue, they must determine why it is important and prepare a paper describing the importance of the issue for the whole state, how a conference on the issue might be conducted and the possible benefits that might result from focusing attention on the issue.

The six regions each present their issue to a summit of approximately 150 academy members in the fall, Conaster said, and each issue and its potential implications for the state are discussed and considered. The group breaks into smaller groups for further discussion and finally one of the six issues is picked for consideration at the academy's annual conference in the spring.

In some cases, Conaster adds, task forces may be formed to look into the other issues.

In the time between the choosing of the conference issue in the fall and the annual meeting in the spring, Conaster and other academy members are busy assembling information about the chosen issue. Experts are contacted and asked to submit papers about the issue; some are asked to appear and present their papers and to discuss them.

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