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Institution's return a win for Indiana

A lobbyist in town likes to say everyone's interests are well-represented in the Statehouse. That's because there's a lobbyist for every possible circumstance.

That may be true, but that doesn't eliminate the biases that can creep into state law.

So Tuesday's resurrection of the Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute was welcome news. For 20 years the nonpartisan, apolitical institute was the source for legislators, the media and the public in general for unbiased budgetary analysis.

The reason it could be neutral was the diversity of those who funded it. Many of the state's biggest corporations chipped in, but so did trade associations, unions and universities.

"There were times when the (institute's reports were) hostile to agriculture, but we were willing to hold our noses because we knew it was important for the state," said **Bob Kraft**, director of state government relations at the Indiana Farm Bureau.

Dozens of companies, unions and others used to fund the Fiscal Policy Institute. Now there are 16, including the city's four biggest law firms, the Indiana State Teachers Association, Eli Lilly and Co. and Cook Group.

The loss of corporate headquarters and a turn toward self-interest combined to reduce the amount of money the institute had for research. In September 2007 former legislator **Steve Johnson** split, and the Fiscal Policy Institute went dormant.

So what has changed to make anyone think it could succeed this time?

"Oftentimes you don't know the value of something until you lose it," said Johnson, who is rooting for the rebirth.

What's lost? Groundbreaking studies, work that led to reforming how township poor relief was handled; another study that led to eliminating the state's unfunded pension liabilities; and another that explored the ramifications of changes to the state's property tax system.

"We lead by providing credible information and by being a trusted resource," said **Steve Rahn**, a vice president with Lincoln National Corp. in Fort Wayne. Rahn took over from Kraft this year as chairman of the Fiscal Policy Institute.

The institute issued its 25th report Tuesday: Economic Hurricane Coming -- Is Indiana Ready? The answer provided by study co-authors **David Bennett** and **John Stafford** is a qualified yes.

In typical Fiscal Policy Institute fashion, Bennett and Stafford walk readers through the process with real numbers and without bias. The veteran analysts both have day jobs, though. Bennett is executive director of the Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne. Stafford is director of the Community Research Institute at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne.

Hiring others to do the research is one way the institute will save money. Its first two directors, **Earl Ryan** and **William Sheldrake**, were analysts first; Johnson was more of a fundraiser. The new executive director, whom Rahn expects to hire in April, will be an administrator first.

It will take \$250,000 a year to make the institute stable, no small feat in tough economic times.

"It'll take a lot of energy and enthusiasm to bring the organization back," Rahn conceded.

The effort is worthwhile if it means important decisions are based on good information.