Walker Q&A: Governor projects confidence for Wisconsin and GOP

Editor's note: Following are Gov. Scott Walker's edited responses to questions Tuesday from the Leader-Telegram Editorial Board. The questions and answers go beyond the discussion of his agenda for the next two years that was detailed in Wednesday's newspaper.

Q: With Michigan just becoming the nation's 24th right-to-work state, in which workers cannot be forced to join a union or pay dues, and given everything you've tackled already, is this something you would contemplate in Wisconsin?

A: No. ... We're going to build off the things we've done. We're going to highlight those five priority areas I've mentioned (creating jobs, developing a stronger workforce, transforming education, reforming government and investing in infrastructure). But in terms of right-to-work, I just think after what we experienced a year and three-quarters ago, that would just be a huge distraction from the things I think otherwise fit into those five priority areas that I think, by and large, will not only get Republican support, but I think on a lot of those issues can get Democrats, or at least some Democrats, voting with us.

I think most people in the state just want stability and say, 'Hey, just get back to work.' Bold things are great. Hugely bold things like what we did before, like what Michigan and others are doing, this isn't the time or the place.

Q: Sand mining probably is one of the biggest issues we have up here right now, and some people are nervous about that because mining operations are being opened at a fast rate. Do people worried about the long-term environmental impact of sand mining have legitimate concerns?

A: We have by far the best sand in the world. ... We're proud of that. It's put a lot of people to work. The Department of Natural Resources has asked for some additional staffing in the budget to do more review of that. There's already a process that's in place, but now because of the number, just to stay on top of that and make sure we're complying with all the existing clean air, clean land, clean water public safety standards in place ... that's something we're inclined to do. We think staying on top of that is incredibly important.

Frac sand, I think there's a legitimate future for that, but I also think it's one where we want to be mindful and have the staff in place to make sure anyone who's doing that is complying with all the appropriate health and environmental standards.

Q: We have a number of state employees at area UW System campuses in Eau Claire, Menomonie, River Falls and Rice Lake, the State Office Building in Eau Claire, as well as other
offices in the region, and our reading on this is that some of these folks haven't had a raise in four years. As you start to prepare a budget, is there any reason for them to feel optimistic at all about the prospects for getting a raise?

A: We're looking at making some sort of an adjustment. We think it's reasonable. In particular in light of the fact that all of the people you mentioned as well as me — I took about an $11,000 hit in terms of paying more for pension contribution and health care costs and things like that, so, believe me, our family feels it like just about anybody else does out there — so I get that.

I think the last few years, while they do have a point, most of their neighbors probably have been in the same boat or in some cases maybe have taken a cut. I'm not asking them to do that. I think (a raise) is reasonable now that we got our fiscal house in order. ...

We made tough decisions, but we changed things to be more realistic to what others are in society, and now we avoided those mass layoffs, and we're in a much better position. We can't go hog wild. We've got to be careful in terms of how we budget going forward so we don't go back to the days of deficits, but, yeah, I think there's going to be room for some sort of an increase, both a general one to adjust overall for people's cost of living ... and in terms of performance incentives as well.

Q: We are a purple state, and one could argue a divided state. Republicans have control of the Legislature and the governor's office, so you pretty much can direct things the way you want to direct them. But if we're ever going to come together, somebody's going to have to offer a carrot to the other side. Do you see yourself doing that moving forward?

A: I think you'll get some symbolic things that are part symbolism, part substance. For example, the incoming (Assembly) speaker, Robin Vos, has named a couple Democrats as co-chairs of some committees. ... I think the biggest thing as the head of the executive branch as governor is kind of trying to set the agenda. ... The best thing I can do to help push that type of feeling of bringing people together is keep focused on pieces of legislation and budget items and priorities that focus in on those five categories I mentioned.

There are going to be some differences in terms of the details ... but I'm willing to work with anybody who's willing to work with us on that. ...

Q: If Act 10, the law that ended collective bargaining for most public workers in Wisconsin, is ruled unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause, would you drop it, or would you try to get everybody in it?

A: I'd try to figure out some way to fix it. I'm not a lawyer, but that argument is pretty lame. ... I'm very, very confident that in the end, either in the appeals court or ultimately in the state Supreme Court, it's going to be upheld. ... We've had a vote on this, and people can disagree with it, but the way to disagree is in two years elect a new governor, elect new legislative majorities.
Q: Do you regret in the 2010 campaign making the goal of creating 250,000 private sector jobs in four years?

A: No. Is it going to be tough? Absolutely. When I made the goal I had no idea that you'd have not only within the state but people from across the country (putting us) essentially under siege in the state for almost a year's time. There's no doubt that had an impact. The recall, all of the protests and everything else had an impact.

A lot of small businesses said they waited to make any investments in the state until after June 5 (the gubernatorial recall election), not just because of being concerned about the protests and the election itself, but being concerned about the fact that after June 5 if I wasn't there, we might go back to the way things were before, and that scared them. So you get almost a year and a half worth of time that was kind of frozen in time in terms of small businesses and other employers out there ...

If you don't have a high, aggressive goal, then you just constantly make excuses for going further down.

Q: After the Nov. 6 elections, there have been a lot of people saying the Republican Party needs to reinvent itself, that it's good in the South and in some parts of the Heartland, but otherwise it just can't win national elections. Do you think the Republican Party has some serious issues? What was your take on the national elections?

A: I think too many national pundits look for a quick answer to everything. ... So Mitt Romney lost. There are now 30 states in the country, 30 out of 50, that have Republican governors, the highest it's been in a dozen years. What I think it shows is that, just like Wisconsin, America is pretty evenly divided, and that it's not just about your ideological beliefs, it's about even things as simple as trust people have in the leaders they elect.

I don't mean this to be a slam on Mitt Romney, but I get what he was trying to say (with his secretly videotaped "My job is not to worry about those people" comment, referring to the 47 percent of voters whom he described as being dependent on government and going to vote for President Obama no matter what), but I think what he said, unfortunately, was somewhat revealing about how he thought about that scenario.

My view of that would be simple. ... If I was him, I'd say, ‘There's two different views of success in this election. My opponent, the president, and some of his allies view success as being measured by how many people are dependent on the government, particularly on unemployment benefits.’ I would have said, ‘I, in contrast, measure success by just the opposite. I measure success by how many people are not dependent on government.’

My view is whichever party nationally in the future can put forward leaders who inspire people, who believe in the eternal optimism of the American people, who can inspire them and say, ‘I get
you. I'm going to look out for you. I'm someone who wants to act in your best interest. I want to help you live the American Dream. I want you to have more freedom and more prosperity.’ That's the message I think that resonates.

Again, I'm not here to nitpick Mitt Romney, but I don't think he nor his campaign did a very good job of communicating. I think their whole mindset, and I got in some arguments with them on this, was this should just be a referendum on the president. It should just be about ‘are you better off today than you were four years ago,’ because in their mind the answer was no, and they win.

What they didn't see coming, I believe, is that the president's campaign did a very effective job of saying, when you're asked are you better off than you were four years ago, ‘No, (but) we're heading in the right direction, we're going to get better soon and, oh, by the way, our opponent is a guy who only cares about rich people like himself, not like everyday people like you and I.’ And I think that's where they completely lost.

That's why I believe you can't have elections that are just referendums on your opponent. You've got to offer something better in connection to that. Romney's message was messed up. I think John McCain's wasn't a very good alternative four years ago. But I don't think that's necessarily a belief that there's something wrong with Republicans, because if that was the case there wouldn't be 30 Republican chief executives as governors across the country.

— compiled by Eric Lindquist