



GUEST OPINION

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Governor's job numbers are not realistic

By Mike Owen

Beth Townsend's column in last week's Gazette ("Beyond job numbers: Hitting goals, serving Iowans," Dec. 8) shows what it looks like when an agency director runs political interference for the Governor.

Instead of acknowledging the weakness in the job growth number she is promoting as director of Iowa Workforce Development, Townsend doubles down in her column. How unfortunate.

Governor Terry Branstad took office in 2011 having run on a goal to create 200,000 new jobs in five years — the context here. He did not advertise 200,000 "gross" jobs in five years. He said "new jobs" — the meaning clear to everyone: We will have 200,000 more jobs than we have now.

Not satisfied with simple math, someone came up with a special and bizarre way to count jobs — add up the net job gains in sectors of the economy that grew that month, ignore the net losses in sectors that shrank — and presto, Iowa Workforce Development had a new line on its official spreadsheet for "gross over-the-month employment gains."

In fairness, the special count started long before Townsend took over at Iowa Workforce Development in February. But while she and the previous director rightly left it off monthly news releases, she pulled out a 206,200-job number for a budget hearing Nov. 30.

To be clear, we in fact are nowhere close, and it's too important to just let politicians fight about it.

Why? We need data, unfettered by political spin, to make responsible observations about the economy.

That's why Iowa Workforce Development didn't offer that measure before Branstad took office.

When you look at the data — still available on the same Iowa Workforce Development spreadsheets — you can see how sluggish job growth has been in Iowa. It's a long-term trend. We are, as Townsend stated, creating jobs in Iowa — a monthly increase of about 1,800 on average for the last five years. Do the math: $1,800 \times 57$ months. With three months left, we're only about halfway to the Governor's goal.

In fact, as we often point out using a calculation from the Economic Policy Institute, we arguably have a "jobs deficit" — we have about 35,000 fewer jobs in Iowa than what we need to keep up with growth in the Iowa population since the start of the last recession, in December 2007.

May I point out, by the way, that while the administration promotes its "all is well" scenario for jobs and the economy, out of the other side of the box we hear that all is not so well that we can adequately fund our schools, or clean our nutrient-polluted water, or provide child care assistance to financially strapped low-income working families.

Yes, the Governor has vetoed all of those things, and he has done nothing to assure better enforcement of laws or promote new steps to help Iowa Workforce Development combat the very real problem of wage theft.

But the more we have to talk about what is math and what is not, the less we can focus on schools, and dirty water, and wage theft.

Mike Owen is executive director of the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project in Iowa City. Comments: mikeowen@iowapolicyproject.org.