

Perry Stepping Up His Presidential Game

By [Reeve Hamilton](#)

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If he opts to run for president again, Gov. [Rick Perry](#) wants to ensure that his entry into the field bears little resemblance to 2011, when he jumped into the Republican presidential primaries with little preparation or forethought.

He is entertaining potential donors and backers at the Governor's Mansion this week, and planning long meetings with policy experts over the next few weeks.

Perry downplayed the significance of his activities when asked about them at a press conference Wednesday. "I talk to people on a fairly regular basis, as I have for the last 22 to 24 months," he said. "Sometimes it's border security, sometimes it's foreign policy, sometimes it's monetary policy."

But those comments belie a more coordinated effort on the part of Perry's could-be presidential campaign.

More than 100 donors and grassroots leaders, from inside Texas and out, are expected to attend the events at the mansion, including a particularly large showing of Iowans. Roughly a dozen politically connected individuals came down from Iowa at their own expense this week "to break bread over lunch, talk informally and share some holiday greetings," said Bob Haus, who volunteered as the chairman of Perry's campaign in the Hawkeye State in 2011.

"It was a very low-key affair, but very much Rick and Anita Perry. Very personal and very personable," Haus said.

According to Peggy Venable, an Austin-based senior policy fellow at Americans for Prosperity, who was at Tuesday's lunch, a clear message was being sent. "He was letting people know he's up to the task should he choose to run," she said. "He told people that he and his wife had talked about it, and should he decide to run, he would be prepared."

At Tuesday's event, Venable said the governor expressed optimism about the country's future and emphasized that the economic success of Texas could be a blueprint for the nation. "His comments were very well received," she said, "and I did not get the impression that these were all people who were committed to him."

Among the notable attendees scheduled to dine at the mansion this week are Tennessee Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey, Pittsburgh Steelers co-owner Larry Paul, San Diego real estate developer "Papa

Doug" Manchester, Mississippi political scion Henry Barbour, former Defense Department official Ian Brzezinski and Fort Worth billionaires Lee and Ramona Bass.

Barbour said Perry's efforts since his previous presidential bid have made a "significant, fundamental difference."

"You go from a candidate who was looking at three-inch binders the night before a debate and not sleeping well because of his back issues," Barbour said, "to a candidate now who is much better-prepared, who spent two years thinking and meeting with folks about how to get the country back on track."

In addition to promoting his preparedness, Perry is logging hours in a downtown office building, engaging in lengthy, informal policy discussions with experts, mostly from conservative think tanks.

Last Monday, he discussed health care policy with a group including Joseph Antos, the Wilson H. Taylor Scholar in Health Care and Retirement Policy at the American Enterprise Institute.

Antos said the freewheeling session lasted about four hours, and was "a good starting point" for a discussion focused on the principles of health policy. But he said he had no sense of specific policy proposals Perry might ultimately choose to advance. "We have no clue whatsoever about that, and it was none of our business, frankly," he said. "We did not discuss what happens the day after tomorrow."

Of the governor, Antos said: "He was actively engaged the entire time. He asked good questions. This is a man who is genuinely interested in what we're doing in health policy, and genuinely concerned."

Other participants included Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute; Avik Roy, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and the opinion editor at *Forbes*; and Thomas Miller, a resident fellow at AEI who studies alternatives to the Affordable Care Act.

"Sometimes you meet with the principle and their advisers, and they're mostly selling you on what they're thinking and what they already have," Miller said. "The governor showed that it was a real conversation. It was an extended period of time with no fuss, no frills, no filters."

On Tuesday, Perry hosted a similar discussion with experts on poverty, income inequality and economic mobility. As in the previous gathering, no specific policy proposals that might later pop up in a presidential platform were decided.

"He seemed to be out to get good ideas from us," Aparna Mathur, resident scholar in economic policy studies at AEI, said. She said the conversation lasted about two hours, but she added, "It's not the end of the discussion, I assume."

"I got the impression that he cares very deeply about the American dream, and he's interested in better understanding how policy can support it," Erin Currier, who directs projects on financial security and mobility for the Pew Charitable Trusts, said of Perry.

More such discussions are planned as Perry continues his prep work. Next week, the governor is scheduled to host gatherings focused on energy and the environment, the budget and entitlements, education, and general economic issues. Later this month, meetings are also in the works for immigration and financial services.