By K.C. Mason

DENVER—That's the consensus of the four Republican men and one Democratic woman who will be representing most of northeastern Colorado in the 2009 General Assembly that convenes Wednesday in Denver.

To be sure, Sens. Greg Brophy, R-Wray, and Mary Hodge, D-Brighton, have other things on their minds, such as water, land use and natural gas regulations. And GOP Reps. Jerry Sonnenberg of Sterling, Cory Gardner of Yuma, and newcomer Kevin Priola of Henderson are concerned about such things as transportation infrastructure, energy development, consumer fraud and maybe even a bid for Congress.

But all that pales in comparison to the overriding issue of the state's budget, which may need to be cut by as much as $600 million by the time the current fiscal year ends on June 30.

"It's all about the economy and jobs," said Brophy, whose Senate District 1 encompasses most of the eastern plains. "These are very uncertain economic times and needs serious leadership."

Brophy couldn't resist taking a swipe at Gov. Bill Ritter and the legislature's majority Democrats, who hold a 21-14 advantage in the Senate and a 38-27 majority in the House.

"We are not seeing the serious leadership off the first floor (where the governor's office is located) that we should be seeing," he said. "It will be interesting to see the folks carping about all the cuts Republicans made in 2003 react now that they are in charge."

Hodge, who won the Senate District 25 seat vacated by the term-limited Stephanie Takis, said she would be taking her cues from a new select committee, which has been meeting for several weeks to find ways to stimulate job growth.

"The economy will define the session, said Hodge. "I'm hoping the select committee will be able to come up with something."

Sonnenberg said his approach to stimulating the economy would be to restrict government growth.

"Yes, the economy is the number one issue and I will continue to be a no-new-tax, no-new fees legislator," Sonnenberg said. "When things are tough, you don't put a larger burden on the working families of Colorado. We should be doing the same thing in government as every working family and that is tightening your belt."

Gardner agreed, citing the Republican creed on government spending.

"The government doesn't generate wealth and create jobs," he said. "If the only solution is government based, it will not succeed.The rebound will be found in the private sector. The government needs to reduce taxes, eliminate regulations and let private enterprise dig us out of the hole."

Priola, a farmer and businessman who won election to Hodge's former House District 30 seat, said he hoped the solutions could be found in bi-partisanship.

"We're going to have a lot of thoughtful decisions that have to be made," Priola said. "I want to sit down and focus on the areas of the budget where we can get the biggest bang for the buck for the taxpayer."

The first bill Brophy plans to introduce is one declaring a one-year moratorium on the oil and gas development regulations, which are scheduled to take effect in April.

"We are plowing ahead with devastating oil and gas rules and ignoring the fact that energy companies are reducing their exploration expenditures by 50 percent, Brophy said. "Energy production is the single biggest industry in the state and we need to enhance, not restrict the industry if we are going to grow jobs."

Industry officials claim between 30 and 40 percent of the drilling rigs that were active three months ago are expected to be idled or moved to another state within the next three months. They said the regulations are the biggest uncertainty in the industry and only add to the consternation caused by dropping prices and pipeline capacity.

Gardner said the oil and gas regulations could become the defining economic issue before legislators this year.

“The economy is all about jobs and helping Coloradans across the state make ends meet,” he said. “The oil and gas rules will be a big indication of whether we are serious about keeping and creating good jobs.”

Hodge and Brophy are expected to sponsor the two of the biggest water bills of the session.

Hodge said she would try again to pass a bill that would allow well users on the South Platte River to buy excess credits from senior water users for use in augmentation plans. The measure could only be used in “wet” years when unappropriated water becomes available.

“I will be carrying the son of 247,” said Hodge, referring to Senate Bill 247, which was introduce and killed in the waning days of the 2007 legislative session. The measure was a desperate attempt to take advantage of last winter’s heavy snowpack and give curtailed well users access to water to repay past depletions.

Brophy is planning a water bill to stabilize the infrastructure and financial arrangements for the Republican River Basin and fish hatchery at Wray.

“We need to help them with their funding issues,” Brophy said, noting he still is working on details of legislature. “We thought we had identified some money to fund that, but now it’s dried up. I’m not sure what we will be able to do.”

Following is a snapshot of some other bills the region’s delegation is pursuing this year:

Brophy: protection or property rights in a potential relocation of railroad tracks out of the Denver metropolitan area and eliminating the potential for abuse of an individual’s right to keep and bear firearms;

Hodge: disposal of electronic (computer) waste, primary election requirements and conservation grants;

Priola: protection for consumers facing default mortgages, allowing out-of-state dental surgeons to practice and instruct at the University of Colorado School of Dental Medicine, removing restrictions to membership on water and other special district boards;

Sonnenberg: taxing districts in urban renewal authorities, game damage reparations by the Division of Wildlife and increasing access to the general fund for transportation infrastructure;

Gardner: creating nuclear power commission, repealing sales tax on semi trucks and fuel efficient vehicles and oil and gas rules as they pertain to private landowners.

Gardner also acknowledges he seriously is considering a 2010 bid for the 4th Congressional District seat that went into the Democrat column last November when Betsy Markey defeated incumbent Marilyn Musgrave.

“I am considering it and will make a decision soon,” Gardner said. “But first and foremost is House District 63. I won’t let anything take precedence over that.”