

Community

County activities and finances are covered

BY MARIAN MCMAHON
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PAINESVILLE – Lake County Commissioner Dan Troy was the speaker for the City of Painesville Office of Economic Development Series Business Breakfast Series held at Rider's Inn Aug. 22.

Painesville Economic Development Coordinator Cathy Bietenman introduced Troy with a recap of his various public offices including Willowick councilman and council president, state representative and chairman of various committees prior to being elected as a county commissioner in 1998.

Since not everyone understands the various roles local governments play, he covered that topic with a focus on county government.

"First of all, (county government is) not as much a local government as I think we're a branch of the state government," Troy said.

The county commissioners are the administrators for the different county branches which record real estate transactions, collect taxes, place valuation on properties, oversee the county funds, the county college, sheriff's office,

prosecutor's office, public defender's office, county courts and more. All of those departments are headed by officials elected by the public.

"Local governments are all subdivisions of state government; every local government in Ohio was created or chartered at some time by the state of Ohio," Troy said.

"Now municipal corporations, through the home rule clause in the constitution, can make some of their own rules, but the county governments and the township governments, the rules are made for them by the state legislature."

Among the responsibilities of the commissioners are the appointment of board members for some organizations such as Lakeland, Morley Library and Lakeland Community College.

One major step the commissioners took was the creation of the Lake County Port Authority in 2007 to replace the Lake County Economic Development Center since a port authority has greater capabilities by state law.

"As somebody said, it was taking the Economic Development Center and putting it on steroids," Troy said.

In order to become more recognizable when people were searching online, and define its role better, LCPA's name was changed in July to the Lake County Ohio Port and Economic Development Authority.

Troy reviewed some of the services offered by the LCPEDA such as business financing like SBA 504 and microloans. A new program is an agricultural microloan program since the nurseries are such an important part of the local economy. He added that Lake County is number one in yield per acre in the state.

Troy spoke of the county finances since 2008, when the economy took a serious downturn. The county itself has reduced its employee staffing by 22 percent since then. However, state law mandates the counties provide certain services such as holding elections. He has long opposed holding special elections because of the costs involved.

One means of funding for the county is the piggyback sales tax, he said, which Lake County was the first to take advantage of back in 1969 when it enacted a 0.5 percent piggyback sales tax. To help fund Lakeland, the

voters passed a 0.25 percent sales tax.

Troy explained the county was granted 2.1 inside mills on property taxes; inside mills (being untaxed) are not subject to rollbacks required by House Bill 920.

Another serious reduction to the county coffers was the drop in interest income which decreased from about \$9 million five years ago down to an anticipated \$750,000 this year.

To help counteract the loss of income due to the reduction in property values, the commissioners voted to reduce the county inside millage by 1.1 mills to reduce property taxes; and it increased the sales tax, much of which is paid by people from outside Lake County who come to shop.

"We picked up probably about \$14 or \$15 million (in sales tax), but we gave back about \$6 million (in property taxes)," Troy said.

The county is receiving some income from the casinos, but it is not as much as promised. The commissioners also decided not to use it as part of the general operating funds. Instead, they are using a portion for a "Budget Stabilization Fund" to help cover unanticipated

expenses such as numerous retirements which require payment of unused sick time and vacation time.

Most of the casino money has been designated for economic development through the LCPEDA.

Troy also covered the topic of regionalization, which he supports, noting Lake County has 18 fire departments, 19 police departments, nine school districts and about eight library systems, all of which have overhead, including administrative costs.

While admitting they were all important, he felt it was important to try to cut the overhead on them through consolidation. However, many people are opposed because they believe there would be a loss of autonomy.

Asked about the problems with the jail, Troy said they needed to decide whether it was worth putting \$20 million into the current facility. He said it was determined the construction, not the design, was at fault, noting there was water infiltration in almost all the bricks.

"It's a sad situation, but we're going to have to deal with it," Troy said of the 25-

year-old building.

He felt there should be consultation with the communities, most of which also have jail facilities, to determine if there should be consolidation.

Troy said he was open to suggestions.

The breakfast was sponsored by SAS Rubber Company which has been in operation in Painesville since 1937. Don Part, executive vice president at SAS Rubber Company, gave a brief overview of the company history and products.



PHOTO BY MARIAN MCMAHON
Lake County Commissioner Dan Troy speaks about how county government operates and its finances at the Aug. 22 City of Painesville Office of Economic Development Business Breakfast.