

Legislators speak at annual breakfast

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BY BEATRICE SHANNON

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MENTOR The Lake County Development Council held its 19th annual breakfast forum Feb. 25 at LaMalfa Conference Center in Mentor. Guest legislative speakers assembled for a question/answer session with more than 200 business leaders from Lake County.

Addressing the audience were U.S. Republican Rep. David Joyce, state representatives, Republican Ron Young and Democrat John Rogers; state senators, Republican John Eklund and Democrat Nina Turner; and Lake County Commissioner Democrat Daniel Troy.

Michael Victor, president of Lake Erie College, acted as moderator.

Major issues addressed by every legislator who spoke were education and workforce development, better access to health care, efficient management of tax monies, and maintaining a vibrant business climate in the state and in Lake County.

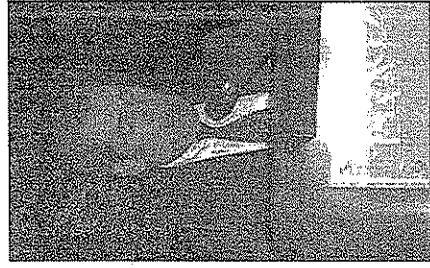
Joyce, of Ohio's 14th District, spoke about his support of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative that supports the vitality of the lakes and shorelines.

"The Great Lakes support 1.5 million jobs, and 40 million people get their drinking water from there. If we lose out on the Asian carp issue, we will have game, set, match - it will be over for the Great Lakes," he said.

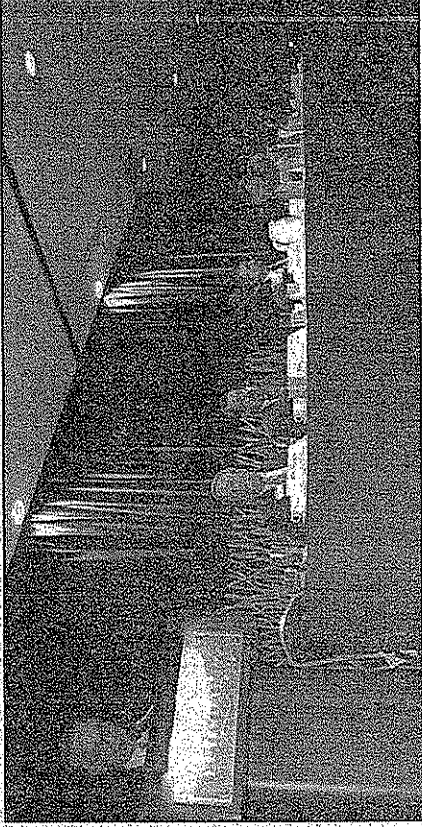
"Lake Erie is a vital asset. I'm fighting hard for it and for you," Joyce said.

He also explained that for the first time in five years, Congress has a budget in place in Washington. It's not perfect, he said, but the Appropriations Committee can develop how to spend the money for each district in the country rather than have the current administration say how it's spent.

Eklund, 18th District, spoke on three major themes: cultivating the business climate in Ohio, in part through tax cuts benefiting small business and a personal income tax cut; better co-ordination of education and workforce development to ready students for available jobs; and government accountability as signified by the Medicare reform bill (Senate Reform Bill 206) to reduce costs and achieve new standards of accountability as to how efficiently



Senator John Eklund addresses the attendees at the Lake County Development Council breakfast forum Feb. 25.



PHOTOS BY BEATRICE SHANNON
Michael Victor, president of Lake Erie College, moderates the panel of elected officials at the Lake County Development Council annual breakfast forum Feb. 25.

it serves its users.

He noted that in 2013, 90 percent of the bills in the Ohio Senate passed on bipartisan support.

"It's important for people to know this," he said. "There's a real sense in Columbus of common duty and goals to make Ohio better." Turner, 25th District, cited several directions he believes the state needs to go.

"We need to give people resources to seek higher education," said Turner. "This is primarily where our investment should go."

Higher education provides higher skill sets needed for the future job market.

"We need to support small business because they hire people who may be hard to employ," she said. "Job creation is the order of the day - making sure people work in jobs that enable them to have a good life."

On tax issues, she referred to the need for a refundable earned tax credit to help lift people out of poverty.

Also, she supports a fair severance tax for oil and gas producers in Ohio that will contribute to the state and provide funds to meet challenges resulting from the oil and gas drilling industries here.

She also explained that Medicaid expansion needs to be codified to stabilize this effort that helps veterans and the working poor.

Young of the 61st District, spoke about good things happening in Ohio since he took office. The unemployment rate decreased in Lake County.

Ohio earned an "A" rating in manufacturing health and a stable credit rating according to the S&P Index. "Ohio is open for business," he said.

He praised recent accomplishments on workforce development, specifically the creation of the ohioeansjobs.com Website that links job seekers with employers.

"If you're an employer looking to hire, there are 2.4 million resumes in that system, and it's free. It requires those signing up for unemployment to post a resume on the website," he said. "It's getting people back to work more quickly."

Young also cited passing Senate Bill 1 that developed Ohio Needs Jobs Workforce Development Revolving Loan Fund as a major step in providing low interest

loans for skills training.

He praised effective educational programs such as Lakeland's Associate Science degree program that serves the automated manufacturing workforce in Ohio in robotics and computer technology.

Rogers, 60th District, highlighted successful labor statistics for Ohio. There were 145,000 jobs added this year; 49,000 manufacturing jobs and 8,800 oil and gas industry related jobs.

"But unemployment rates have gone from 6.7 to 7.2 percent, so we have a ways to go," he said. "The family poverty rate at 12 percent has held steady for 2011 and 2012 - nearly half the school children in Ohio continue to get government subsidized lunches. This is unchanged over the past four years."

"There are still a lot of issues to be addressed," Rogers said.

Troy told the audience that Lake County government is well managed, financially stable, and prepared to address future challenges.

According to Troy, the county commissioners have managed and improved mandated state services including: the criminal justice and legal system that operates the jail, prosecutes offenders, and pays for their defense; administering criminal family and civil justice in the courts; property recording and evaluating and tax collection; focusing Job and Family Services on providing temporary rather than long-term support; budgeting resources to run elections, overseeing water management and waste water treatment, and solid waste disposal, as well as collaborating with county engineer projects such as Route 2.

"One thing we can be especially proud of in Lake County is what I refer to as Main Street.

Main Street, state Route 2, is finished after being a difficulty for a lot of years. It certainly works to improve our economic climate," Troy said.

Also, the county's heavy reliance on property taxes for revenue has changed.

There's a significant increased reliance on taxes based on consumption.

"Approximately 60 to 65 percent of our revenue comes from 1 percent county sales tax paid by non-residents shopping and dining in Lake County. We certainly appreciate that," Troy said.

Each panel member spoke to specific questions from the audience.

The question for Rogers was, "What are plans to continue workforce development?"

Rogers answered that job training can begin at the high school level.

"When I went to high school, kids had the opportunity to work on machinery—they don't necessarily have that today," he said.

He suggested the business manufacturing community and schools get together to create more curriculum programs so that, for instance, junior and senior high school students could train at a two-year college and still be under the high school system.

He said when they apply for jobs, they would have qualifications for hire.

He gave an example of 20 job applicants that could not be hired—they couldn't pass the drug test—a different problem to be addressed.

A question for Joyce was, "Is it legal for the President to change the health care law without Congressional approval?"

Joyce answered directly that there's no law that enables this.

"It's frustrating to all of us who care deeply about the Constitution. We made the law, it was passed by the House and Senate, the President signed it, and the Supreme Court ruled on it; it doesn't give him any authority to change it," he said. "So it's necessary for us to continue that fight with him. He needs to come to the table and try to do something about it. One sixth of our economy is caught up in an operation that doesn't work."

The question for Turner was, "How can you balance your statement that small businesses are vital with your current efforts to increase minimum wage which adversely impacts small business?"

Turner answered that the state minimum wage did increase automatically. She said it's important to balance the increase with the needs of small business. You can't have people working several jobs, living in poverty, and being subsidized by government. It would be better to vary people's skills so that they can make a living wage without subsidies.

She said government and business need to find a way to achieve a living wage in a

See SPEAK on page 8

way that does not harm small business.

The question for Eklund was, "What can Ohio do to give money back to K-12 (kindergarten through 12th grade) education programs?"

Eklund replied, "Given the budget, we increased funding for K-12 education by three quarters of a billion dollars, added 280 million for early childhood education."

The problem, as he explained it, is not bad teachers, wasteful administrators or insufficient money - but that we need to raise standards and expect students to achieve and put them in that atmosphere. We need to fund education on how many are graduating job ready, not how many are applying to get in. Educators like those at Lake Erie College know what needs to be done.

"We need to think out-comes instead of inputs," he said.

We need to expect good solid citizens—then we

move in the right direction for kindergarten to grade 12.

A question for Young was, "The state budgets have been balanced by cutting state funding to our cities. Do you see that being reversed or funding other ways to meet the needs of our cities?"

Young explained that there was a cut to local government funding in the previous budget—the state faced huge shortfalls at that time.

There was a call to cut the other half of state funding, but that was rejected by the legislature—it never occurred.

"This last budget - I voted against - there were further cuts to local funding—property tax increases—I stood against that," he said. "If people live in a community that's so dependent on government funding, they might consider moving or having more influence at city hall."

He explained it's important for communities to become self-sustaining, developing economies for one.

Communities need to work

hard to survive without money from on high. Many are being successful in this way.

The question for Troy was, "Do you think all perspectives are considered when all commissioners are of the same political party?"

Troy answered that it's the choice of the voters.

He said to look at the job, not labels people may wear. Understand, they have moved forward.

"I don't think there's a Democratic or Republican way to run a good county government. We show we work hard and work together to get the job done for citizens we represent," he said.

The mission of the Lake County Development Council is to raise awareness of economic issues and to address problems and opportunities affecting Lake County business conditions. For more information visit www.lakecountycouncil.org.