
Movers, planners see 'tech belt' passing through area

By STEPHEN ORAVECZ Tribune Chronicle

YOUNGSTOWN — Two congressmen said Monday that cooperation is the key to unleashing the full potential of the region stretching from Cleveland to Pittsburgh, encompassing the Mahoning Valley.

Reps. Timothy J. Ryan, D-Niles, and Jason Altmire, D-Pa., call the region the Tech Belt. They organized a daylong conference at Youngstown State University to take the first steps toward building that cooperation.

About 100 representatives from organizations throughout the region attended. They included major hospitals such as University Hospitals in Cleveland and University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in Pittsburgh; universities such as Carnegie Mellon, Case Western Reserve and Hiram College as well as YSU; and foundations, planning organizations and private high-tech companies.

Altmire said they tried to cover all the growth industries — from bio-technology to alternative fuels and advanced manufacturing.

John Austin of the Brookings Institution said in his opening remarks that the region already has considerable education, industrial and technological assets. For instance, he said of the top 100 universities in the world, 20 are in the area — more than in the Northeast high-tech corridor or on the West Coast.

He also said the region is a huge player in the global economy. The Great Lakes states plus Ontario, Canada, would be the world's third-largest economy after Japan. Given the resources available, he said, the area needs to stop fearing China and starting competing to win the economic battle.

To cash in on those resources, Cleveland and Pittsburgh representatives have to limit their competition to sports, where the Steelers and Browns are rivals, and start cooperating in areas that count in the global economy, the two congressmen said.

Ryan said, "Can we all survive alone? Sure, we can survive. Can we reach our potential alone? No, we can't."

"We have this sort of arbitrary border that has been drawn there," Altmire said. "We want to break it open and bring people together."

The idea for the conference grew out of an announcement earlier this year that two organizations that help bio-tech businesses get started — BioEnterprise of Cleveland and Life Sciences Greenhouse in Pittsburgh — would start working together. The two congressmen hope to see that kind of cooperation extend to other industries.

The immediate goal of the conference was to give participants specific tasks that will help make the Tech Belt a reality. A follow up conference is planned for the Pittsburgh area.

Ryan said, "The success or failure will be directly related to our expectations. If we see this as impossible, it will be. If we expect it to succeed, it will."

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