

Leaders look to polish Rust Belt

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Congressmen view the area from Pittsburgh to Cleveland as one region.

By [DON SHILLING](#)

VINDICATOR BUSINESS EDITOR

YOUNGSTOWN — About 100 leaders from the Mahoning Valley, Cleveland and Pittsburgh are starting to talk about how they can cooperate to turn the Rust Belt into a Tech Belt.

The brainstorming session Monday at Youngstown State University was called by U.S. Reps. Tim Ryan of Niles, D-17th, and Jason Altmire of McCandless, Pa., D-4th.

The congressmen said the key to creating a high-tech economy in the region is to join forces, not view neighboring communities as competitors.

"We've got to get really serious really quickly in order to compete with Mumbai [India] or Shanghai," Ryan said.

He sees the Tech Belt Forum as one of the first steps in preparing to compete. Leaders discussed how they could cooperate better to foster development of businesses in information technology, advanced energy or medical devices.

"This is all about figuring out how to unleash the potential of this region," Ryan said.

The day included small-group discussions on topics such as financial investment, research and development, talent and work force, innovation and marketing.

Next steps

Ryan said the participants will decide what the next step will be, but added that action plans will be developed. He suggested another large group meeting would be held in Altmire's district.

"We know the foundations will play a key role. We know the universities will play a key role. How that all comes together, we're not really sure," Ryan said.

He encouraged the attendees to make the program a priority. He said the region already has much of what it needs to succeed in a revitalization: universities, lifestyle amenities and work ethic.

"We need the leadership. The leadership is the lubricant of success," he said.

The group was encouraged to view itself as part of an even larger region by John Austin, a Michigan resident and researcher who is a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution in Washington.

Rich region

He views the Great Lakes area as a "mega-region" that would have the third largest economy in the world if it were a country. It includes Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and parts of six other states and Canada.

It also is home to 20 of the top universities in the world, as ranked by a Chinese institute, and one-third of the nation's new patents.

Austin said the region needs to change its attitude so communities and officials can work together to push for a common federal agenda. Everyone in the region should be celebrating Honda's announcement that it is building an assembly plant in Indiana because it will have a positive effect on other states as well, he said.

"We should be worried when a plant goes to the Southwest or some other region of the country," he said.

He said the region should push for more federal research money, continued cleanup of the Great Lakes, protection of waterfronts, ease of trade between the U.S. and Canada and solutions for national pension and health-care issues.

shilling@vindy.com