



Ryan, Altmire focus on 'Tech Belt'

By Harold Gwin (Contact)

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Some collaborative efforts are already under way at both ends of the 'Tech Belt.'

YOUNGSTOWN — U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan of Niles, D-17th, said the area stretching from Cleveland to Pittsburgh needs to find a way to bring all of its talent and research together to lift up the region's economy.

It's a potential economic development area being referred to as the "Tech Belt" by Ryan and others who see technology development as a key to the region's economic resurgence.

Ryan and U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire of McCandless, Pa., D-4th, participated in a seminar at the Youngstown Club on Friday on a regional approach to community and economic development, focusing on Pittsburgh and Cleveland as the two ends of that development scheme.

That puts the Youngstown area right in the middle, Ryan said.

"Those political boundaries [the Ohio-Pennsylvania border] really don't matter a whole lot," he said, urging some 150 leaders from universities, community development organizations, nonprofits and community development organizations from both sides of that border to work in collaboration on a goal of revitalizing the entire region.

There's been a lot of recent bad economic news, but it should also be seen as an opportunity to piece together an effort to take advantage of the next economic boom in the country, Ryan suggested.

"Just think about what we have in this region," he said, referring to research and development companies, universities, the arts, professional sports teams and recreational opportunities — all coupled with a very favorable cost of living that makes this area of the country a very attractive place to live and a prime target for development of a tech belt.

"We need to re-brand our image," he said, explaining that the area should become known for "leading the charge in the new economy."

"We only do that by working together," Ryan said.

Altmire said he and Ryan were comparing Cleveland versus Pittsburgh and Youngstown versus New Castle one day, and decided there needed to be an effort to pull the area together in one direction geared toward economic development.

He said they learned that there are already efforts under way by companies such as BioEnterprise Corp. of Cleveland and Pittsburgh Life Sciences Greenhouse that are involved in attracting and investing in technology companies.

Officials from both companies addressed the seminar, explaining how they are collaborating closely in that process.

Officials from JumpStart Inc. of Cleveland and Innovation Works of Pittsburgh also addressed the gathering, explaining that they work closely together as investment companies in helping to bring new companies to production and new products to market.

Combined, JumpStart and Innovation have invested some 52 million into 157 companies that generated an additional \$600 million in private and government investment in the region, most of it in the Pittsburgh area.

There's no reason this area can't be a tech belt, Altmire said.

There is a very long-term vision on this, but it needs something tangible to show the world, he said, urging those in the room to come up with a collaboration plan that demonstrates what help and amenities are here to attract new companies.

One possible field awaiting development is alternative energy, Altmire said, noting the area is sitting on massive coal and natural gas reserves and has nuclear power plants.

Technological development in the alternative energy field could become the equivalent of the steel industry in terms of creating jobs and building a new economy, "and that's just one example," he said.

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