

Rendell gives good news on Fayette grant

By James Pletcher Jr., Herald-Standard
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Gov. Ed Rendell whirled into Fayette County Thursday to bring some "good news" and stump for some of his economic development proposals.

With two other stops in Pittsburgh ahead of him, Rendell spoke briefly at the annual Fay-Penn Economic Development Council banquet at Nemacolin Woodlands Resort and Spa in Farmington.

"I don't have a check for you," he said, referring to state Sen. Richard Kasunic telling the group in introducing the governor that he has come with money before.

"But I do have good news," Rendell said, adding that the state on Thursday approved a grant to the Fayette County Business Park from the Infrastructure Facilitation Improvement Program (IFIP).

Rendell offered few specifics on the grant. But Fayette County Commissioner Vincent Vicites said the county applied for \$800,000 to use for continued development of the 300-acre site along Route 40 west in South Union Township.

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"This is extremely good news," Vicites said, adding that the Redevelopment Authority of Fayette County "deserves most of the credit" for applying for the funding. Vicites said the county has about 100 acres remaining in the 300-acre site that can be developed and the IFIP grant will help accomplish that.

"We want to improve the areas of the state that are doing exceptionally well and going strong. Southwestern Pennsylvania is going gangbusters," Rendell said.

He noted some other statistics.

"Just today, the federal Department of Labor informed us that in April we had 3.8 percent unemployment, an all-time low in the past 30 years. We were also below the national average (for joblessness), which is the first time we have done that in a decade," Rendell said.

"Our wages are increasing faster than the economy of New York," he added.

But Rendell said state government is "cognizant of areas that still struggle and need more help. So we are trying to get as much aid to southwestern Pennsylvania as we can."

Rendell said he sees every area of Pennsylvania "from a visitor's standpoint. This (Fayette) is a county that has exceptional natural beauty. It can be a wonderful place to live. But we read a lot about business being unable to find the skilled workers they need. We are trying to meet that problem."



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Gov. Ed Rendell (right) receives a Fay-Penn Economic Development Council coffee mug from council chairman Leo T. Krantz Thursday at Nemacolin Woodlands Resort & Spa. Robert Esquivel/Herald-Standard

He said education will be important in filling business needs. Rendell reviewed some of his education programs, promising to "keep the pressure on" to improve the quality.

Throwing out some numbers, Rendell said the state budget has \$100 million more this year for education and that his \$220 million program to put laptop computers with every student in Pennsylvania is on track.

But he reviewed a national "guest worker" program through which companies can import qualified workers when they prove they can't meet their needs from the U.S.

"Most of these workers who get visas to come here work in the computer industry at jobs that pay from \$40,000 to \$60,000 a year. But the fact that we have to issue these visas for such good jobs asks a question - Aren't there any Fayette County graduates who want a \$50,000-a-year job? We don't train our students well enough," he said.

Changing that, Rendell added, "is essential to our future. And shame on us if we allow that condition to go on."

Education continues to be an answer to many of the state's problems he said. "If Fayette County is going to continue to flourish, we have got to keep the legislature's feet to the fire on this issue."

Rendell also emphasized his proposals to fund transportation projects, such as the Mon-Fayette Expressway.

He has proposed leasing the Pennsylvania Turnpike to an outside company, claiming it will give the state about \$1.5 billion year that would be dedicated to transportation development. Rendell said the state maintains more than 40,000 miles of highway and 25,000 bridges, the third highest number of spans in the nation.

"But 5,900 of those bridges are structurally deficient. It would cost \$8 billion to repair them all at once. I have proposed we put \$1 billion a year into transportation," through leasing the turnpike. He is also proposing dedicated funding to support mass transit systems, money that would come through taxes on oil companies.

"Oil companies, as a group, pay about \$70 million in taxes in Pennsylvania a year but they have sales of about \$1 billion. Just one company that is domiciled in Pennsylvania pays about \$40 million of that figure."

Rendell said they avoid paying more in taxes due to laws allowing them to claim profits in other states. But by changing laws governing how corporations account for their income, Rendell said the state could reap about \$790 million a year.

He chided Republican lawmakers in Harrisburg for not moving on the situation.

He also said it is important for the state to spend money fostering growth.

"I get sick of hearing each year at budget time that lawmakers don't want to spend money. But at some point in its history, every business has to invest in itself if it wants to grow. That's what I have been able to do, invest money in our growth.

"But we must take all this momentum we have and keep it going. We can't get cold feet now. Let's grab the moment."

Fay-Penn also invited Robert L. Morgan, senior vice president and private client portfolio strategist from Janney Montgomery Scott LLC brokerage to speak at the dinner.

Morgan discussed growth in the global and U.S. economies.

While the world economy, Morgan said, is growing at a rate of more than 5 percent per year, the U.S. economy is growing at 1.5 to 2 percent.

"But I don't see the U.S. heading for a recession anytime soon. I think the Federal Reserve has been very successful in slowing inflation and preventing recession."

Fay-Penn also presented its 2007 Eberly Economic Development Award to Parametric Technology Corp. (PTC), which opened a solution center in Uniontown in 2006.

The award, named for the late Robert Eberly, businessman and philanthropist, recognizes an individual or company that impacted the local economy.

PTC employs 36 people at its downtown Uniontown offices and plans to employ about 125.

David Rossi, Uniontown general manager, accepted the award on behalf of PTC, a global company with about 4,000 employees worldwide.

"We are extremely proud to be part of Uniontown and to be recognized for our impact on the local economy," Rossi said.

He explained that PTC could have located its new office "anywhere in the country" but chose Uniontown in part thanks to the work done by Fay-Penn and the governor's office.

"We are extremely happy with the talent we are finding and the cooperation we are getting from the universities. But because we deal with many Fortune 500 companies, they are becoming more interested in Uniontown.

"We are a global company and Uniontown is going global as well," Rossi said.

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