

LOCAL & STATE

Jobs the main issue, Specter says

By Michelle K. Massie
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After barely winning the primary election last month, U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter confirmed his commitment to small business yesterday as he delivered the keynote speech at the annual luncheon of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania.

Specter, R-Pa., spoke to a crowd of more than 250 chamber members and guests at the Westin Convention Center hotel, Downtown.

He laid out a list of concerns, including the uncertainty of the airline situations in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, strengthening communications between law enforcement agencies, terrorism and job outsourcing, and how each could influence small business. Employment and the economy were highlighted in his remarks.

While there has been economic growth, including gains of 308,000 jobs in March and another 288,000 in April, Specter said that growth has to continue.

"The issue of jobs, jobs, jobs is No. 1," Specter said. "Small businesses provide some 70 percent to 80 percent of jobs in America. We have to be sure those job opportunities come to all sectors of our society."

"We're very much concerned about the problem of outsourcing and the elimination of jobs."

Specter was also clear to stress the importance of having job opportunities in the first place. He noted the disparity between unemployment rates among workers.

In January, the national unemployment rate was 5.6 percent, and for black workers, it was twice that, at 10.5 percent. In terms of college graduates, in Decem-

ber 2003, white college graduates had an unemployment rate of 2.6 percent, while the rate of their black counterparts was 4.1 percent.

He also recognized the significant wage gap between male and female workers, and the lack of women holding major corporate offices.

"The quality of job opportunities and the issue of civil rights is never far off the table," Specter said. "We have to remember that discrimination is barely below the surface in our society and it's something we have to work through all the time."

Members of the chamber seemed pleased with Specter's remarks and reiterated the importance of jobs and job creation as a matter of survival.

"As small businesses grow, employment grows," said Gregory Spencer, chairman-elect of the African American

Chamber of Commerce. "[Specter] is trying to do some things on the national level for small businesses. We need to have political strength on all levels for businesses to grow."

Representing those levels at the luncheon were local and state politicians, including Mayor Tom Murphy, Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato, U.S. Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Swissvale, and fiscal oversight board member Jim Roddey.

The African American Chamber of Commerce also celebrated its 10th anniversary as a charter organization yesterday. It promotes business and professional opportunities and seeks economic parity for black business owners and professionals throughout the region.

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