

# BUSINESS

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Marketplace



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**POWERBREAKFAST SPEAKER**—Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato reviewed his accomplishments and shared his vision for the region at the African American Chamber of Commerce of Southwestern Pennsylvania's PowerBreakfast meeting.

## Onorato shares vision for region, accomplishments

by Sonya M. Toler

Courier Staff Writer

There have been several negative events that affected this region over the last year, but Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato prefers to focus on the positive.

During a Jan. 21 breakfast meeting of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania he said, "We went through a lot, pain in the county last year... We could easily focus on the negative things. I refuse to do that. I refuse to accept... at somehow our best days are behind us as a region."

The speech marked Onorato's second appearance before the Black Chamber. He took the opportunity to highlight his accomplishments as it relates to the county's African-American population, which constitutes less than 13 percent according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Attending the function with Onorato were several of his African-American hires and appointments, including Richard Taylor, Port Authority board member; Tim Johnson, head of administrative services; Ruth Byrd Smith, MBE department director; and Louis "Hop" Kendrick, former county MBE director who now serves as a consultant to address minority contracting and faith-based initiatives.

Of the approximately 150 appointments to boards and authorities Onorato has made, he said 30 went (approximately 45) have been minority. Of that number, 33 are female, 25 are younger than 40 and about 17 are Republican.

"When I say diversity, I'm not just talking about African-American," Onorato said. "I'm talking about gender, I'm talking about age."

The Democratic chief executive also shared his pleasure in being able to advance the issue of row office reform, something that has not received se-

rious discussion until now.

Last month, Allegheny County Council voted to put a referendum on the May ballot that, if approved would reduce the number of elected county row offices from 10 to four. The referendum, was approved by all eight council Democrats and two of six Republicans.

However, Onorato admitted that consolidating the row offices would not equate to any "significant savings," but instead it would "improve efficiency" by merging functions such as purchasing and mailing.

A major story over the past several months has been US Airways. Once the county's major employer it is struggling to emerge from its second Chapter 11 protection filing.

While on its face the US Airways story is negative, Onorato said several positives have occurred at the airport, from the facility being ranked the best airport by several leading magazines to several low-cost air carriers opening gates at Pittsburgh International Airport. Most recently, Southwest Airlines announced it would be flying out of Pittsburgh. Onorato stressed that no public money was used in the deal.

Southwest's announcement, said Onorato, immediately prompted other airlines to consider Pittsburgh. He would not detail which airlines.

Onorato did say he is focusing on putting in infrastructure in the currently vacant 10 acres surrounding the airport.

Additionally, he is working to clean up the nearly 2,000 acres of brownfield sites along the county's riverbanks.

"Every other city in America has decided that the rivers are going to be their best asset," he said. "No business will touch a dirty site."

Ultimately, Onorato believes the city and county

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governments must merge, and he offered Louisville as an example that should be followed. He said Louisville addressed vital issues such as avoiding the dilution of African-American votes before the referendum was put before voters.

"It's time to streamline this region and get competitive again. If we go from the 58th largest city in the United States to No. 7, that has its own implications with the federal government."

He believes certain departments or functions, such as public works, economic development and computer services, should be merged.

"We might not get two where I want to go, but we're already merging major de-

partments," he said, noting the merger of the city and county emergency call center.

"This first year hasn't beaten me down, I'm still optimistic," Onorato said.

His talk was followed by a brief question and answer period during which one person asked what are Onorato's plan to help the county Port Authority fix its \$30 million budget deficit for the current year and a projected \$45 million deficit for the 2005-06 year that will begin July 1.

Though he expressed sympathy for what he called "some vulnerable people who use our public transportation system," Onorato said "the county can't solve the problem. This is a state problem. The county couldn't come up

with enough money to solve the problem."

The county maintained the \$23 million line item for Port Authority in its budget, which Onorato pointed out is the largest line item in the budget.

When asked his opinion on a recently announced plan by Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy to focus on creating housing as part of the redevelopment of Downtown, Onorato applauded the effort and said the county has a vested interest in making sure its urban core is viable.

After the session, the chamber raffled two tickets to the Jan. 23 AFC playoff game.

The lucky winner was Morgan Subramanian of the Allegheny Group.

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