

Fitzgerald: College grads have replaced steel in refueling Pittsburgh's growth

by Christian Morrow
Courier Staff Writer

It was a full house at the African American Chamber of Commerce March PowerBreakfast as staff from nearly every county department and authority joined the members to hear Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald.

He began by noting the huge economic news that Shell will build a \$4 billion "Cracker" plant in Monaca, Beaver County to refine ethane from Marcellus and Utica shale mining. While it isn't in Allegheny County, it's proximity to Pittsburgh brings new business opportunities for suppliers, engineering, financial and logistic services to the region.

Allegheny County is seeing new development, he said, with US Steel retooling its coke facilities in Clairton and development in Cranberry. Fitzgerald also touted the increase in high tech investment by firms like Microsoft and Google, and the \$400 million expansion of PNC in Downtown Pittsburgh.

"One reason is we have one of the highest percentage of people with college degrees between the ages of 21 and 35 in the country, the exact opposite of where it was at the height of the steel industry," he said. "People are coming here for the educated workforce.



COMMUNITY PARTNERS—African American Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Doris Carson Williams and longtime member Chauncey Smith of Heinz pose with Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald following his March 16 PowerBreakfast speech.

But it's more than that, where before we had steel, now we have energy, medical, financial, high tech and educational sectors fueling our growth.

"And we have the movies. Hollywood East, they're calling us. With the Batman movie, and very soon, they will be spending \$40 million to film a movie in Braddock. So things are looking good."

But Fitzgerald also acknowledged the county faces challenges. The two issues he is currently focused on are the ongoing property reassessments and the looming 35 percent cut in mass transit. Both, he said, could potentially derail the positive economic growth he'd previously addressed.

"We're the only state in the country that doesn't have a unified assessment. We have a system that pits counties against each other," he said. "And it's ridiculous that one judge can demand we do this,

when counties around us haven't done it in 20 years.

"Not only that, the lawsuit by the school districts that started this was about poor neighborhoods being over assessed and wealthier ones being undervalued, this reassessment doesn't address that. So I will keep working with Harrisburg to get this done on a statewide basis because this system is unfair to our county."

As for the Port Authority raising fares again and potentially reducing its number of bus and train routes to half of what it was a decade ago, Fitzgerald said it would be disastrous for both residents and businesses.

"People who can drive will spend more, the roads

will be jammed and the people who can't drive, will be out of work and on the unemployment rolls," he said. "Businesses will move out of the city. It will cost the region and the state more in the long run. So again I am working with our delegation to increase support for the recommendations in the Governor's Transportation Funding Advisory Commission."

Following his remarks Chamber President and CEO Doris Carson Williams introduced new members, reminded the audience that Pittsburgh Police Assistant Chief Marrita Bryant needs volunteers to help prepare for next year's National Organizations of Black Law Enforcement Executives convention in Pittsburgh.

Williams also reminded

members of its March 21 Diabetes Workshop at Three Rivers Youth, its Candidate Forum for the 24th State House seat race on April 12 and its May 10 annual meeting at the William

Penn Hotel. The speaker for next month's PowerBreakfast will be West Penn Hospital President and CEO Duke Rupert.

(Send comments to cmorrow@newpittsburghcourier.com.)

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