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Wagner at chamber breakfast

by Christian Morrow

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Though he didn't remind the audience of his run for governor until near the end of his remarks, state Auditor General Jack Wagner sounded more like a candidate than the holder of the state's second oldest elected office.

The former Pittsburgh councilman and state senator, gave the crowd at the July 13 African American Chamber of Commerce PowerBreakfast meeting more of his thoughts on policy, than on the ins and outs of running the office that acts as the state's independent fiscal watchdog.

Wagner said, given the recession, Governor Corbett's latest budget is balanced and responsible.

"It doesn't raise taxes, but a lot of people don't like it because of losses to education and social services," he said. "But sometimes raising taxes isn't a bad thing because there's no better spending than on yourself."

Wagner noted that his office, like all others at the state level, is making do with less, but he praised his staffers Connie Portis and Lance Griffith for leading a great team in that effort.

"My budget is down 25 percent since I took office and my staff has been reduced from 755 to 598," he said. "But that's just the way it is. We have to work harder, longer and smarter."

In addition to the fiscal audits his office performs of all state departments, he also conducts performance audits, which he said in some cases are more critical because they analyze whether money for a specific program is being spent as intended.

An example he cited involved the Megan's Law website, which when authorized by the legislature was administered by the state police.

"It was totally inadequate," he said. "So we challenged the state police, and eventually they took

the best in the country. If you want to know whether a child predator is in your town, it can tell you if there's one on your street."

While he supports various state programs such as the Opportunity Grant Program, designed to help small businesses grow and create jobs, often they do not perform as advertised.

"The jobs promised are not being created, and when we have persistent 14 percent unemployment for African-Americans in Pennsylvania that's unacceptable," he said. "So while I support the tax credits for the Shell cracker plant in Beaver County, I'm skeptical of the claim it will create 20,000 jobs."

From a fiscal standpoint, Wagner said the biggest problem cities and municipalities face is their unfunded pension liabilities. The legacy cost of past contract agreements is leading to bankruptcies like Scranton's.

"There are 3,000 public pension plans in the state and all have excessive costs built into them," he said. "Pittsburgh's pensions are less than 50 percent funded. I think cities should be reimbursed for their tax-exempt government property, and I would support a single pension system for all municipalities. The state has to take leadership on this."

After Chamber President and CEO Doris Carson Williams thanked Wagner, she introduced new returning members, noting that Cameil Williams is now the MWDBE director for the Port Authority of Allegheny County.

She also said members would be receiving free drives from the Rivers Casino loaded with all the information they need to do business with the casino.

Upcoming PowerBreakfasts will include a free group with US Senator Bob Casey Jr. on Aug. 14 and Andy Warhol Museum Director Eric Shine on Sept. 21.

(Send comments to cmorrow@newpittsburghcourier.com.)



WING IT UP—State Auditor General Jack Wagner fields questions during the July 13 African American Chamber of Commerce PowerBreakfast as President and CEO Doris Carson Williams looks on. (Photo by Christian Morrow)