

Fitzgerald talks transit and jobs at Chamber Breakfast

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Written by Christian Morrow - Courier Staff Writer



RICH FITZGERALD

As always, when Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald speaks at the African American Chamber of Commerce PowerBreakfast, it's a command performance. But his April 19 appearance was even more so. Not only were all the county government department heads present, but so were Fitzgerald's parents, as was former Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection Director Kathleen McGinty, who recently announced her candidacy for governor. Fitzgerald almost immediately spoke of shoring up the Port Authority of Allegheny County, noting his part in helping to avoid a 33% service cut last year. But he wants to do more. "U-Haul just released its report that said more people are moving to Pittsburgh than any other destination in the country right now, so I'd like to see us get to where rather than just maintaining service, we can expand again," he said.

He said the residents of the Hill District, Uptown, and Oakland should have the same rapid transit options that commuters from the South Hills have with the T, especially given plans to revitalize that corridor with business, retail and housing development. But there's a catch-cost. "That tunnel under the river was the last of the 80-percent federally-funded transit deals. If you want light rail in the Hill, you'll have to wait 15 years because that's how long it will take us to raise the \$1.5 billion that would be our share," he said. "But Bus Rapid Transit is basically rail on wheels; dedicated lanes, timetables, stations. It could be done for a tenth the cost, in less than four years. The Rockefeller Foundation just recommended four cities for BRT, Pittsburgh was one of them."

Fitzgerald praised the growth in the city and surrounding areas, praising the development in Pittsburgh's Hill District, East Liberty, Larimer and Bloomfield. He also noted companies upgrading facilities and expanding to meet new orders created by Marcellus Shale development, like Dura bond, a pipe company in Duquesne and US Steel with the \$750 million upgrade to its Clairton Coke Works. "Workforce development is key to getting our people especially those in the African-American community ready for these jobs," he said. "We have Alex Johnson over at CCAC working on that."

Fitzgerald also said since he has become county executive, more African-Americans are being included. "With African-Americans historically underrepresented on authorities and boards, 26% of my appointees are African-Americans and 17% of county employees are African-Americans," he said. He summed up by saying he would be holding a forum with Black Political Empowerment Project founder Tim Stevens at Duquesne University on May 13 focusing on compelling private corporations to adopt a "Rooney Rule" when interviewing for top executive positions. Chamber President and CEO Doris Carson Williams thanked Fitzgerald and his parents for coming and reminded members that the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement executives still needs volunteers to help with its National Conference, which is coming to Pittsburgh in August. "And our annual meeting and luncheon is May 1 at the Omni William Penn hotel," she said. "And our mayoral candidates forum is the following day right here at the Rivers Club. We'll open at 4 p.m. and begin at 4:30. All the candidates have confirmed."

(Send comments to cmorrow@newpittsburghcourier.com.)