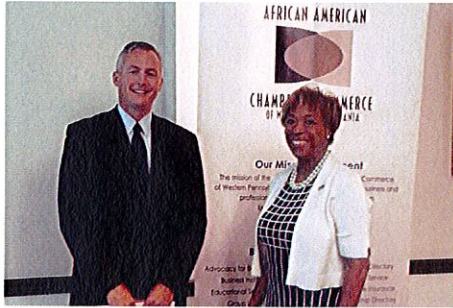


Smith pushes partnership, building economy at Chamber breakfast

Christian Morrow



MATT SMITH AND DORIS CARSON WILLIAMS

Though former Pennsylvania Senate leader Matt Smith has been president of the Greater Pittsburgh Area Chamber of Commerce for just six months, his inexperience only showed when he tried to load his PowerPoint presentation.

“Legislators aren’t known for their expertise in PowerPoint technology,” he joked. “But what we at the Chamber are known for is our advocacy for businesses across the 10-county Southwestern Pa region—and not just on improving the economy, but on improving the quality of life.”

Smith highlighted the organization’s achievements in 2015 for the audience attending a special July 21 breakfast meeting hosted by its partner organization, the African American Chamber of Commerce.

At the state level, Smith said the chamber’s biggest success was eliminating, finally, the Capital Stock and Franchise Tax—a tax on assets businesses paid even in years where they lost money.

“And in Washington, we helped pass the FAST Act, for dedicated infrastructure funding,” he said. “For years, civic planners, construction firms, contractors couldn’t make any infrastructure job projections—except in an intermittent piecemeal way. Now they can. Every member of the Pennsylvania delegation supported it.”

Looking forward, Smith said chamber advocacy, along with the Pittsburgh Regional Alliance, which markets the region, and the PA Economy League, which serves as a think tank, will be focused on three things: workforce readiness, community development and infrastructure.

Smith noted that over the next 10 years, between baby boomer retirements and new job creation, there will be 340,000 jobs to fill.

“Even if every student in area schools projected to graduate did so, and stayed in the region to work, which is impossible,” Smith said. “That would be 260,000. That still leaves us 80,000 people short.”

But while it will advocate for passing immigration reform legislation with a specific emphasis on highly skilled immigrants, the chamber will also push for reforms at the federal level to align career training curricula with the needs of employers, and at the state level to reform Career Technical Education policies and programs—so that locals, including African Americans, are not left out.

One of the tools that will help in this effort is the Chamber’s recently completed Inflection Point study.

“It is unique in that it is not only quantitative and qualitative, but it is occupation-focused, rather than industry focused,” he said. “Two examples: Cosmetology—there are 1,215 currently enrolled for a projected 1,240 annual openings at \$23,171 per year. So that market is saturated, as opposed to Machine Tool Technology, which has 358 enrollees for a projected 777 annual openings at \$37,520.”

Naturally, he noted, a trained machinist has translatable skills, and like accountants or IT specialists, can work in a number of industry sectors.

“There is no single magic bullet to address these issues,” he said. “But regardless, workers in the future will need to be more technically-minded, more customer service-oriented, have some level of leadership skills, and be agile and nimble—to make those moves across industries.”

And the responsibility for this ongoing learning cannot fall solely on the worker, Smith said.

“Government and schools need to adapt to offer the skills training needed for lifetime learning,” he said. “We want to create a ‘Career Awareness Hub,’ that guidance counselors—and we need a lot more of them, by the way—can use that tells them what jobs there are, where they are, and what growth potential they have so that, early on, they can steer kids toward the full spectrum of opportunity.”