

OH-PENN for Business to Coordinate Resources

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What was a solid line is now a dotted line.

That's how Robert G. Garraty, executive director of the Pennsylvania Workforce Investment Board, sees the border between Ohio and Pennsylvania following the establishment of the five-county Interstate Workforce Region.

Established by governors Ted Strickland of Ohio and Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania, the regional designation formalizes efforts to coordinate and collaborate on work-force and economic development among entities and governments in Mahoning, Trumbull and Columbiana counties in Ohio and Mercer and Lawrence counties in Pennsylvania. Officials say it is the first-such designation in the country.

Officials from the five-county region gathered Feb. 27 at Leo's Ristorante in Howland to announce the network.

The collaborative effort began about a year ago, says Bert Cene, director of the Mahoning and Columbiana Training Association, as the counties looked at how to better link economic and work-force development resources. The designation allows for joint planning, sharing of information and coordination of services among the three counties in northeastern Ohio and the two in western Pennsylvania.

"We know that regional collaboration is something that is needed for any economy but is especially needed in this economy," says Lisa Patt-McDanile, director of the Ohio Department of Development's Workforce and Talent Division.

In February 2008, the U.S. Department of Labor awarded the region a \$250,000 grant to further the effort. The money funded development of a regional system to provide rapid-response services to dislocated workers, establish a coordinated industry-specific outreach, align educational institutions and training programs to meet the needs of employers, and to seek new employers for the region.

The money also was used to identify strengths and weaknesses of the area and to identify commonalities and obstacles to cooperation, says William Turner, Trumbull County One-Stop administrator.

The Interstate Workforce Region designation "is to build on the strengths that we have as a five-county region in work-force and economic development, and be more strategic in the way we approach those topics," says Jessica Borza, chief operating officer of Mahoning and Columbiana One-Stop. "The main goal is to make it easier for job seekers and for employers to access the services and the resources that are available."

"We have communications going across state lines that never happened before," says Angela Palumbo, Pennsylvania CareerLink administrator in Mercer County. "We have been over here with the [General Motors] rapid responses, helping in any way we can with staff," she adds.

Right now, the way work-force development dollars come down the channels, Ohio dollars must stay in Ohio and the same holds true for Pennsylvania. "We have many employers who have companies in Pennsylvania and in Ohio, yet we can't use our work-force dollars to train them in Ohio," she says. "We're hoping this takes away those kinds of barriers."

The federal government likes to see these kinds of regional groups, Garraty says, and such collaboratives are "going to be at the front of the line, at least when it comes to work-force development grants."

The formal plan is to be presented to stakeholders in the region at a summit planned for April 23 in Sharon, Pa. That plan, which is still being crafted, will include initiatives to jointly market the region for development outside the area.

Mahoning County Commissioner Anthony Traficanti remarked that one hope he had was more collaboration with the Pennsylvania counties on Youngstown-Warren Regional Airport. One of the airport's biggest investors is Winner Aviation, he says, the fixed-base operator founded by Sharon entrepreneur James E. Winner Jr.

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