

Pennsylvania, Ohio link could benefit the Valley

If there's strength in numbers, then the Mahoning Valley should have the power to move mountains. From the Fund for Our Economic Future, a collaborative effort to strengthen regional economic competitiveness in Northeast Ohio, to JumpStart, a regional entrepreneurship assistance organization, to membership in the Appalachian Regional Commission, resulting in special funding for job-creation projects, to Congressman Tim Ryan's technology belt linking Pittsburgh and Cleveland, with the Valley in the middle, this region appears to have a lot of assistance at its disposal.

Therefore, the challenge for local governments and development agencies is to take advantage of all that's offered. Success will be measured by how much outside money comes to Mahoning, Trumbull and Columbiana counties and how many new jobs are ultimately created.

Indeed, the regional approach to the economic revitalization of the Valley can be seen in the creation of the nation's first Interstate Workforce Region announced late last month by Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland and Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell.

The Interstate Region encompasses Trumbull, Mahoning and Columbiana counties in Ohio and Lawrence and Mercer counties in Pennsylvania.

Challenging times

"Regional collaboration is more important than ever as a driver of economic growth, especially in these challenging economic times," Strickland said.

"A workforce with the skills and training to succeed in the 21st century workplace is essential, and Pennsylvania's local and regional workforce development partners are helping us realize that goal," said Rendell.

The member counties will share information, plan jointly and coordinate services to the region's workforce and employers.

The Interstate Region is an outgrowth of the federal Workforce Investment Act that aims to prepare workers for job opportunities, and help businesses meet their employment needs.

Such collaborative efforts have long been recommended by the federal government, but local officials have to make them work.

Regions like the Valley that are still recovering from the demise of major manufacturing — in its heyday this area was one of the most important steel producing centers in the country — must establish clear goals and develop strategies for achieving them.

For too long, the tri-county area has settled for crumbs while the large counties and metropolitan areas have sliced off major portions. Regional collaboration could change that dynamic.