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Finding ways to help industries in distress

Republican Manufacturing Task Force meets at C-GCC

By Hallie Goodman

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GREENPORT — The Assembly Republican Manufacturing Task Force held a roundtable forum at Columbia-Greene Community College in Greenport Thursday to discuss ways to help distressed industries.

Local manufacturing executives, politicians and representatives from economic development groups took part in the discussion. The task force, led by Assemblyman Brian M. Kolb, R,C,I-Canandaigua, included local Assemblyman Pete Lopez, R,C,I-Schoharie, and Assemblyman Marc Molinaro, R,C,I-Red Hook, and spent the bulk of the two-hour event listening to attendees describe the many roadblocks that Hudson Valley manufacturing businesses face.

The high cost of energy, a lack of tax incentives and town boards that tie up or stop projects from being approved were all cited as reasons why the area, and New York in general, is struggling to attract and retain jobs. In addition, many said the programs that do exist focus on attracting new jobs rather than helping businesses stay afloat so they can keep their employees.

“The programs are all geared toward attracting new manufacturing jobs,” said Kenneth Flood, executive director of the Columbia Hudson Partnership. “We need to change almost on a dime, because we need programs to keep the jobs that are already here. There is no help to expand, but there are incentives to move.”

“[Saturn Industries] is 50 years old and has been in the city for 37 years. There are 30 people in the workforce,” said company President John Lee. “The Empire Zone offered us no benefits. I have never even seen a politician say thanks for staying here. I’m not saying we need that, but it is a very challenging time to stay in business.”

“In the Berkshires, they offer many incentives for businesses to grow. Not just to move from one place to the other, but to grow,” said President and Chief Executive Officer of the Columbia County Chamber of Commerce John Colby.

New York state's inability to compete with other states was also widely discussed. "We need to be competitive against other states, and currently we are not" said Molinaro.

"We need to look at what the competition is doing," said Art Baer, chairman of the Columbia County Board of Supervisors. "Can we compete? No."

"Studies show that NY is a totally unfavorable environment for business," said Assemblyman Jane Corwin, R,C,I-Williamsville. Adding that businesses don't come into her office the way that many other groups do. "It's not in our DNA to form picket lines — but the word needs to come from voters. Not just assemblymen."

Several business owners cited the high prices that local power companies charge new business, often upfront.

Paul D'Onofrio, owner of American Spacer Technologies Inc., said he got hit with \$10,000 from National Grid to be held in escrow for three years when he purchased a business in Hudson recently. "Meanwhile I saved four employees," he said. "There were no incentives, no tax breaks ... there is nothing new for retaining jobs."

Some said that the bureaucracy and regulation surrounding land use was frustrating for small businesses who often can't afford engineers.

Frank Doherty, president of Redwing Sand and Gravel, said that his company has purchased properties only to have the community turn around and ban them from mining it.

"There are serious issues with towns all over the area, with their zoning and power. The Nimbys come out of the woodwork and ban mining. I am selling ice control sand to about 50 communities — so there is a demand. But towns should not be allowed to spot zone or change the zoning after we buy the property," he said.

Columbia County Board of Supervisors Deputy Chairman Lynda Scheer concurred. "In small towns and communities, things can come to a screeching halt," she said.

Scheer said that a wind turbine project, which she thought was completely benign, is still being held up a year later and has cost her community thousands of dollars.

"Local municipalities need to become active in creating land policies. They should work to pre-approve and complete GIS in advance as much as possible," said Molinaro.

Several in the crowd expressed skepticism toward the idea that anything would come from the discussions, inferring that it was too little, too late.

"Albany is well aware of our problems," said Hudson Mayor Richard Scalera. "Outsourcing is not new. We've lost 700 manufacturing jobs in a year and a half. Jobs that we didn't have to lose. Now we have 700,000 feet of manufacturing space, and the owners are not trying to replace the lost jobs, they just want to sell," he said. "The real impact will be next month with 400 more jobs going as Kaz closes."

"These people that are leaving the area — leaving the country, we gave them incentives," said D'Onofrio. "Where's the penalty if you take a pilot or IDA and you have not paid it back?"

Baer said the county is including claw back clauses in newer PILOT

(Payment In Lieu Of Taxes) agreements. "We passed a resolution putting Kaz back on the tax roll," he said, explaining that the company will be hit with a large tax bill. "And we are tightening up claw backs."

Scott Shulz, vice president of operations for Taconic in Albany, said that he would feel more comfortable if the task force were bipartisan, as the assemblymen were in the minority.

"We are not helpless and hapless because we are Republicans," said Lopez. "Each of us are agents of change in our local governments."

"We don't care if the majority takes our ideas and runs with them," said Kolb. "We can reach across the aisle, we have a problem to fix. Collectively we have a very strong voice."

As the forum wrapped up, Lopez suggested that the assemblymen ask Gov. David A. Paterson to offer Empire Zoning to a distressed industry rather than an area, and shift the emphasis onto retention.

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of TheDailyMail.net .

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