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Preble County sees manufacturing, farming as future



EATON, Ohio -- Dr. Jay Lehr is a futurist. On Tuesday, he shared his vision for Preble County's economic development and growth with about 80 individuals from around the region.

And his message was clear: Do what you do best and let people know exactly what that is.

Lehr said farmers need to promote their trade and the technological advances in the industry to get students from the area interested in a future in farming. He also said the area

needs to promote its ability to produce skilled manufacturing workers and a strong infrastructure that involves trucking and rail transportation options.

"I thought it was an awesome presentation," said Laura Bailey, who works in sales in Richmond and lives in Preble County. "A lot of the stats he provided -- I didn't realize a lot of those things. The information was good, and I think it can bring more jobs and businesses to the area."

For example, Lehr said that despite the high unemployment numbers around the country, there are 200,000 jobs in manufacturing that are unfilled in the U.S. He added that the United States outproduces China in manufactured goods by 45 percent, something the general public is often misinformed about because of the increasing number of goods produced in China and sold in the U.S.

And these numbers are good for Preble County, which has a rich history in manufacturing and agriculture.

Lehr said a lack of training and skills keep manufacturers from filling the 200,000 openings. Preble County officials think the region is perfectly positioned to capitalize on the downfall of other areas.

"When we look at where things are going to be growing in Preble County, it is going to be manufacturing," said Preble County Economic Development Director Shawnda Combs said. "We know they are going to be higher-paying jobs than the service industry, and we can use what we already have and work with the trade schools in the area to build a pool of workers for employers."

One county official said he liked what he heard, but he would be happy with any jobs that come into the area

"We need jobs, that's the main thing," said Donnie Jones, the Twin Township Trustee. "Any jobs would be good. Then we would have more people making money and paying taxes. We have everything we need, we just need to get the jobs here."

Lehr also shared his views for the next 10 years - some gloomy and some optimistic.

He said many items (newspapers, checking accounts, post offices, land line phones and TV as we know it) will not be around in 10 years, replaced by new, better options.

He also said that fossil fuels will continue to provide our nation's electricity despite the creation of "green energy" alternatives and that gas prices will never drop to \$3 again, but instead stay in the \$3.50 to \$5 range.

On the bright side, he said the U.S. will continue to lead the world and will not be challenged militarily by any other countries around the globe. He also thinks the country will fix its immigration problem in the next 10 years.

Tuesday's forum involved individuals from Preble County and counties around the area. Combs said she invited members of the Economic Development Corporation of Wayne County to the event and was disappointed they did not attend.

"I invited them all," Combs said. "We have been in communication on different things, and we even met and tried to do some joint marketing. I know we have a ton of people living here that work over there, and a bunch of people live there and work here. I wanted to reach out to them and let them know they we want to work together. To me, there are no borders on economic development."

Staff writer Robert Sullivan: (765) 973-4471 (765) 973-4471 or rsullivan7@pal-item.com