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Kasich's broadband plan would give Valley a boost

Economic development in the Tuscarawas Valley could get a competitive boost through a statewide broadband initiative announced by Gov. John Kasich as part of his second State of the State address.

The speech Tuesday in Steubenville marked the first time the presentation has been made outside of Columbus.

Kasich announced a program that will use new technology to open up the state's broadband infrastructure. The Ohio Board of Regents said the state will invest about $10 million to provide faster Internet connections statewide.

Gary Little, executive director of the Tuscarawas County Community Improvement Corp., said it would "make it possible for us to have the kind of capacity and speeds found on the East and West coasts and in major cities. It would give us the opportunity to compete with them for the research and development operations that we've been hoping" to attract locally, such as in the Tuscarawas Regional Technology Park in New Philadelphia.

In the past, companies contended that the broadband capacity they needed was unavailable in the region, he said.

"This will help us change that dynamic and become more competitive," he said. "Then, the other factors, such as a lower cost of living and doing business than you would find in the urban areas, could help give us an advantage.

"The 100 gigabits (Gbps) per second is 'the gold standard,' the same capacity as in Japan and many European countries. I think that will help us a great deal."

One of the most far-reaching aspects for area residents will be that "the kinds of delays in streaming video via the Internet that are pretty common now, will practically disappear," Little said.

State Rep. Al Landis, R-Dover, praised Kasich for making the speech away from Columbus. He said it gave more people the opportunity to hear the speech in person, and he saw constituents from Tuscarawas, Harrison and Belmont counties. Because of the variety of attendees, the governor spent more time than usual "bringing everyone up to speed."

"I would have liked to hear even more about plans for going forward," he said.

Landis believes that economic strides are being made. He pointed to Ohio soaring from 48th to 9th in one year in terms of "investibility – people who are willing to invest money in Ohio. We're No. 1 in the Midwest now."

Landis also said he's seeing improvements in the auto and steel industries. As major automakers make investments to upgrade production plants, that "feeds down the supply chain to local manufacturers and services," he added.

He said that there are high expectations for economic results for exploring for oil and natural gas through the shale formations in the region.

State Sen. Joe Schiavoni, D-Canfield, said he had mixed feelings about the address.

"It was just a highlight reel of Ohio, and what he feels he's done as governor in the past year," he said. "He said he inherited all of these problems, but he didn't really give any indication of what he plans to do. That was a problem."

Schiavoni also cautioned that "you don't want to paint an overly rosy scenario. There are still a lot of people suffering. I know a lot of qualified folks who are looking for a job. I think he kind of overstepped a couple of times when saying there's been such an economic resurgence."

He said Kasich talked about the boom in oil and natural gas exploration and that it should be conducted in a safe manner and not risk danger to the environment.

"But he didn't lay out any plans for regulations and standards to ensure safety for the environment while also fostering building the economy," Schiavoni said. "I wanted to hear more alternatives, but we didn't."

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