

Kasich's agenda

Speech touches variety of key issues for area residents

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During Tuesday's State of the State address, Ohio Gov. John Kasich unveiled plans to reorganize state job training programs, boost broadband network speeds across the state, expand school voucher programs and make it easier for felons to get out of prison and back to work.

Kasich's 90-minute address was given in the auditorium of a Steubenville elementary school. It was the first time the annual speech has been delivered outside Columbus.

Kasich said Steubenville was selected because of the top-rated schools there and the "knocked-down but never knocked-out" attitude of the community, which is seeing a resurgence as oil and gas exploration in that region has taken off in recent months.

The governor said he is committed to the safe development of the oil and gas industry. He said policies are being developed in Ohio to protect the environment but that also recognize the need for independence from foreign energy.

"We have to do all those things, but we cannot let our fears outweigh the potential," he said.

Kasich's speech was briefly interrupted by hecklers as he was talking about oil and gas drilling.

"We won't be still," a woman shouted.

"I don't want you to be," Kasich replied.

Marietta resident Red Spence, 78, said he is not a Kasich supporter but that he agrees with the governor on his approach with oil and gas exploration.

"I have some land in Monroe County and I do feel there is a safe way to develop this resource," he said.

Spence, a retired teacher from the Wolf Creek district, said he disagreed with the governor's comments that he hoped to expand the state's school voucher program and to put more emphasis on evaluating teachers.

"If they would just let teachers teach and stay off their backs things would be a lot better off," he said. "And these voucher programs and charter schools do nothing but take money away from our public schools, which in my opinion are simply the best."

Kasich said over the past few years the state voucher program has

grown from 13,000 students to more than 60,000. He said giving parents money to enroll students in better performing schools "give our poor people a chance."

"We have to have excellence at every school," Kasich said.

The governor also said teachers need to be evaluated to ensure excellence in the classroom.

Lynn Laing, health and gym teacher at Warren High School, said there are always problems with evaluating. She said the bigger issue facing schools is the lack of funding.

She said it is hard for districts like hers to compete with districts in larger cities and suburbs.

"It's frustrating for a lot of us that we don't have the technology and teaching tools other districts have," she said. "We want to be able to provide those things for our students, too...It seems like every year we're asked to do more with less."

Laing said she was excited by the governor's plan to boost the state's broadband infrastructure, something he said would make the state more appealing for business. Kasich said boosting Internet speeds would also help hospitals and universities share information faster.

Laing said many students in her rural district are still without broadband services at their homes.

"It's another tool that we could use and would only help our students," she said.

As expected, jobs, job creation and job training were a main focus of the address. Kasich said Ohio is doing better, as the state has gone from 48th in the nation in job creation to ninth in the past year.

Kasich said companies are relocating to Ohio and that the state's automotive, steel and technological fields are growing.

Kasich said the state has 77 job training programs located within 13 agencies.

"There's limited accountability," he said, adding he plans to evaluate and reorganize all state training programs.

David Brightbill, executive director of Washington-Morgan Community Action, which provides services such as weatherization, energy assistance and job training to residents in need, said he has concerns about Kasich's announcement.

"The devil is always in the details," he said. "Anything that makes the state more efficient works for me, but anything that makes the state more involved in what happens locally can be very problematic... They sometimes operate more slowly than we do. When someone is laid off, we have a rapid response program and we take that name seriously."

Ohio Rep. Andy Thompson, R-Marietta, said he was impressed by the governor's address.

"I was delighted for the governor to come to Appalachia and see his attention on this part of the state," Thompson said. "Steubenville and this part of the state need a message of hope and I think we're seeing some hope with what is going on with this shale play."

Washington County Democratic Chair Molly Varner said she thought Kasich's address focused too little on rural Ohio.

"I just wish in general that he would have had more to say about Washington County and the 31 Appalachian counties in the state," she said. "We're the people that traditionally have been in the worst shape for the longest time and who never seem to see a full bounce back from hard economic times."

Varner said Kasich touted job growth, but always in larger cities.

Washington County Republican Chair Marilyn Ashcraft attended the address and said she pleased with the message and delivery.

"It was a lot of talk about the jobs created and getting people back to work," she said. "But it was also about business coming back to Ohio and how we're doing better. I think we're very lucky to have this man as governor. Politics don't play a part in what he believes in."

One of the more controversial points of the address, Kasich said the state needs to get out of the way of felons who have served their time and want to become productive members of society. He said state laws currently prohibit felons from getting licenses to cut hair or drive large trucks.

"People deserve a second chance," he said.

Marietta resident James Chapman, 56, said he agreed with Kasich, and with another plan the governor announced that would allow current inmates to earn days of credit for getting job training while in prison.

"If you have paid your dues, you shouldn't be penalized anymore," Chapman said. "And if you're working on making yourself a better

person while in prison, why not reward someone for those efforts?"

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