



Economic development conference addresses future of Appalachian Ohio

Sen. Sherrod Brown and alumnus David Wilhelm among speakers

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By George Mauzy

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown and Ohio University alumnus David Wilhelm were in Athens on Wednesday to talk about the economic future of Appalachian Ohio.

They were among the speakers at the "Positioning Appalachia: Economic Growth Strategies for Success," conference, which focused on the future of manufacturing, business incubation, rural economic development and new market opportunities in the region. The conference was hosted by the [Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs](http://www.ohio.edu/voinovichschool/) and the Regional Economic Advancement Program.

Wilhelm introduced Brown as a politician who has always worked hard to create jobs in Ohio.

"The focus in Washington should be on jobs," Brown said. "There are things we need to do. We need an infrastructure bank, enforce trade rules better, work with small businesses, and buy American. When we come out of the recession, you will see that we are much better off than we were 30 years ago."

Brown has helped the Voinovich School secure nearly \$900,000 in [Economic Development Administration](http://www.eda.gov/) (EDA) funding to be used to leverage private investment, expand business assistance, create jobs, bring new products to market, and improve the economy in southeast Ohio.

On Wednesday, Brown stressed that Ohio has many positives to build on. He said the state is third in the U.S. in manufacturing (behind California and Texas) and is also a leader in business incubator programs, wind component manufacturing, solar technologies, and food processing. He said Ohio has to continue to be a leading state in clean energy, aerospace technology and weatherization.

"As a nation, we can't feel sorry for ourselves and give up on investing in things like broadband, infrastructure, education, and technology," Brown said. "I don't want to live in a country like that. We can't cut our budgets to get out of this



Sen. Sherrod Brown talks with David Wilhelm

Photographer: Emily Martin



David Wilhelm speaks with WCMH channel 4 reporters after his talk

Photographer: Emily Martin



Keynote speaker Jeff Finkle

Photographer: Emily Martin

recession – we have to invest and we have to grow."

Wilhelm, an Athens native and president of Woodland Venture Management, told the Ohio University Inn audience that although Appalachian Ohio has challenges in access to capital, it also has tremendous assets as well.

"Appalachian Ohio has an early stage fund, a seed stage fund, angel networks emerging, and permanent operational systems that didn't exist 10 years ago," Wilhelm said. "We have a variety of capital providing mechanisms that exist because of the hard work of a lot of people in this room. It is one of the building blocks to the future of Appalachia."

Wilhelm said Appalachia Ohio has assets and momentum. He said an example of that is the fact that Ohio University creates more revenue from the commercialization of its technology than the much larger Ohio State University.

He stressed the point that Appalachian Ohio residents are resilient and know that they must create wealth that is sustainable and shared. He said the local iron and coal industries are examples of former profitable businesses in southeast Ohio that could not be sustained because of an eventual lack of natural resources.

"We (Appalachians) are a self-reliant people who have learned to rely on ourselves," Wilhelm said. "I think we build an idea that is born in southeastern Ohio, businesses that originate in southeastern Ohio and hire workers that live in southeastern Ohio. That's what ED MAP and Diagnostic Hybrids did. This is fundamentally important as we move forward."

Wilhelm and CEO and president of the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio Cara Dingus Brook introduced the new Ohio Appalachian Business Council (OABC) to the audience. OABC is a private sector partnership that represents Appalachian Ohio at the state level and serves as the southeast JobsOhio regional partner. Its primary goal is to improve the region's economy by bringing jobs to the area and helping businesses grow.

Conference keynote speaker Jeff Finkle, president and CEO of the International Economic Development Council (IEDC) in Washington, D.C., talked about national trends and economic opportunities for Appalachia Ohio.

After providing data that show the current state of the U.S. recession, Finkle said economic development has been hindered by a lack of access to capital and financing, business downsizing and closures, declining real estate development, cuts to city, county and state budgets, and a lack of political support for economic development.

Finkle said areas that show potential job growth are healthcare, information technology, utilities-energy, financial services and public transportation. He said local communities should be focusing on strategic partnerships, business retention, entrepreneurship, renewable and clean energy, and regional cooperation.

He added that nine of the 10 counties in the state with the highest unemployment rates are in southeast Ohio, so the region would benefit from:

- Creating partnerships between higher education and the private sector
- Enhancing cooperation between the private sector and local CEOs
- Partnering at the local and regional levels to increase investment and boost marketing efforts
- Collaborating with the Voinovich School on economic development issues

In addition to the speakers, the conference featured sessions on:

- Strategies to boost Appalachian economies
- Retention and expansion
- Business incubation
- How to successfully market a community
- Ohio's opportunity in polymers

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