

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

September 27, 2004

Boosting the Pioneer Valley Economy

Economic development moved front and center at two Pioneer Valley events last week. First came a Wednesday session at Holyoke Community; a Basketball Hall of Fame followed on Friday. Each presentation showed promise for our part of the state, and if both perform as expected, our economy will gain strength.

Wednesday's meeting introduced Ranch Kimball to the region. Ranch is Governor Romney's Secretary of Economic Development, the newest cabinet member. He scheduled the meeting for the dual purposes of announcing new business assistance program and awarding work force training grants to companies in the region.

Friday's session celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Pioneer Valley Plan for Progress, ten years in which business and community leaders worked together to evaluate the strengths of our region and create a road map for our success in the new century. The 21st century sounded so distant when the Plan for Progress was initiated, but its new reality can be well shaped by the new plan.

Secretary Kimball chose Holyoke as the site to announce the new business assistance program. Officially called the Business Resource Team, it will be marketed as the BizTeam. Remember that name if you might need its services because the phone number is 877-BizTeam and the website is mass.gov/bizteam. Creating simple access to government programs is an elusive goal, one that Governor Romney has targeted. Businesses can need help with any number of issues, and the BizTeam promises that a single contact will start the ball rolling on any of those issues.

Wednesday's program concluded with the presentation of 16 workforce development grants to regional employers. Adding up to more than \$600,000, the grants will help modernize operations and enhance the job skills of 1,200 employees. I talked with Rocco Falcone, whose 25 Rocky's Ace Hardware Stores will use a grant to train employees in new technical, management and administrative techniques that will allow the business to expand beyond its present size.

In congratulating the grant recipients, Secretary Kimball noted that most applicants fail to request additional help because the process is so cumbersome. Changing that reality is one reason for creating the BizTeam.

Secretary Kimball returned to the Pioneer Valley on Friday for the unveiling of the new Plan for Progress. The plan was presented to 350 public and private sector leaders in center court of the Basketball Hall of Fame in an innovative format. Speakers mounted the state after being introduced as the lineup; a referee even showed up from time to time to whistle a "time-out" in order to keep the ball rolling. The program targeted goals ranging from public and higher education, improved infrastructure and equitable state funding to a repetition of the need that Wednesday's presentation already promises to fulfill – efficient regulatory processes and workforce development.

Mayor Ryan presented a reminder that the city of Springfield faces the most serious financial crisis in its long history, a situation that stands in stark contrast to the positive plans for our economic development. It appears to me that a highly appropriate response to that crisis is to face it, work through it and, each day, to lay the groundwork that will make Springfield the hub of a new as it has been for the old economy of the Pioneer Valley.