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Ideas and opinions voiced about energy in Ohio during Monday roundtable discussion at JCC

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STEUBENVILLE — Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland's long-term energy plans for the state were discussed during a roundtable discussion Monday at Jefferson Community College.

The discussion, hosted by state Sen. Jason Wilson, D-Columbiana, was to obtain local opinions on the governor's long-term plans for energy production and consumption from a variety of sources, including energy producers and consumers, local businesses and private citizens.

Strickland's Energy, Jobs and Progress for Ohio plan outlines several major goals for Ohio after state-imposed rate stabilizations on energy producers expire in 2008, including keeping energy costs from skyrocketing after the expiration; modernization of the state's energy infrastructure; increasing energy efficiency with utilities; balancing energy regulation with competition; pursuing renewable energy sources when feasible; and keeping the state's plan "green" in dealing with carbon emissions due to energy production and consumption.

Also discussed during the roundtable was the impact of rising energy costs for local manufacturers and businesses as well as the benefits of producing cleaner coal to help Ohio become more energy self-sufficient in the future.

Wilson noted the governor expects legislators to give him a report on the public feedback gathered at the roundtable discussions throughout the state.

"My goal is that I'm hoping Ohio can become the energy capital of the Midwest," said Wilson, adding advanced technologies such as coal liquification could help bring more prosperity to the area by producing energy using natural resources locally available.

"The governor is basically giving us 90 days before he asks (legislators) what they are hearing about the plan from their districts back home."

The other goal is to try to get all those involved in the energy issue on the same page, added Wilson. He outlined how becoming a major player in future energy development could be a boon to the state and local economies.

Jade D. Davis, policy analyst for the Ohio Senate Democratic Caucus, said the governor's plan, in the form of proposed state Bill 221, was a sweeping attempt to address the complex and sometimes competing interests among energy users and producers.

"We're never going to use less energy," said Davis, adding the state needed to begin planning now for the future of energy.

"This bill will allow us to diversify our growth," Davis added.

Davis went on to say the bill attempts to address a way for the state to become more energy independent by allowing for new ways to use natural resources while at the same time addressing environmental concerns about carbon emissions.

"We need a way to clean up coal," said Davis, adding Ohio is the fifth largest consumer of energy in the nation. "What can we do with the carbon (generated by energy production and consumption)?"

"Eighty-seven percent of all electricity in Ohio is generated through coal," said Wilson, adding the abundance of coal in the region is going to be key for the state's goal of energy independence.

Michael Cary, president of the Ohio Coal Association, echoed that thought.

"This bill is a very good first step," said Cary, adding new technologies developed for a cleaner use of coal as an energy source would be vital for the state's goal of energy self-sufficiency. "Every time we get a cleaner coal plant, that's good for Ohio."

Dave Wheeler, general manager of community affairs for American Electric Power, agreed coal is vital to the state's energy future. He said Ohio "wasn't suitable" for alternative energy sources such as wind or geothermal energy production.

State Rep. John Domenick, D-Smithfield, said state legislators also are concerned with the economic impact higher energy rates could have on citizens and businesses.

"We want to make sure our interests are protected here," said Domenick of the effects higher energy costs could have locally. "We need to act now."

David Pryzbylski, vice president of corporate administration for Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Corp., said energy costs would have to remain affordable for the local steelmaker to stay competitive globally. He said many overseas steel producers Wheeling-Pitt competes with are subsidized by governments rather than the free market.

"We're not competing against other companies," he said, adding rising energy costs are a major concern for the steelmaker. "We're competing against other countries."

Wilson and Domenick said input gathered during the roundtable would be reported to the governor.