

Experts discuss shale gas benefits in region

Forums being held across state

Paula Grubbs Eagle Staff Writer

🕒 January 25, 2020 📁 Local News 💬

A panel of experts on shale gas drilling and its economic benefits shared their knowledge Friday morning with 75 local business and industry professionals, government officials and students.

A Think About Energy Briefing organized by state Rep. Marci Mustello, R-11th, was held at Butler County Community College's Founders Hall. The forums are being held across the state to apprise counties of the industry's positive impact.

George Stark of Cabot Oil and Gas Corp., Joe McGinn of Energy Transfer, Dave Spigelmyer of the Marcellus Shale Coalition, Lisa Campbell of BC3 and Mustello each spoke for 10 minutes on the many and varied positive effects the county and region have experienced since shale gas drilling began in 2008.

Matt Henderson of Henderson Consulting said the briefings have been held throughout the Appalachian Region in Pennsylvania “so people will know what's going on in terms of opportunity.”

Other energy experts agreed, pointing out that Butler County is the 7th largest gas producer of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, countless jobs have been filled in the shale gas field and in industries “downstream” that support gas development, and farmers are large beneficiaries of shale gas development.

Henderson said industries like AK Steel benefit from the decreased natural gas costs caused by shale gas development, and farmers are able to use their \$20,000 to \$30,000 monthly surface lease incomes to fund their grandchildren's college educations.

Farmers with surface leases also are able to pay their annual property taxes and focus on less labor-intensive farming such as beef cattle or crops.

“It's helping to keep the family farm going,” Henderson said.

He said all Think About Energy Briefings include students, either from local high schools, trade schools or community colleges, so young people can learn about the job opportunities inherent in shale gas development and its “downstream” industries supporting the field.

After breakfast and a networking period, the five-person panel each took about 10 minutes to talk about the positive economic effects of shale gas development in the county and surrounding areas.

Mustello, the keynote speaker, recalled elected officials discussing Marcellus Shale development in the early 2000s, and everyone's confusion about what the new industry would mean for the county.

“We didn't know what it was all about,” she said.

Fast forward more than 20 years, and Pennsylvania is awash in so much natural gas that the price of the commodity has been driven down, but jobs in and related to the field have skyrocketed.

“Marcellus Shale has been a blessing to Western Pennsylvania,” Mustello said.

She was glad the Butler County Area Vocational-Technical School was able to bring a handful of students to the briefing to learn about the training and well-paying jobs available to young people just out of high school who take up a trade.

“It's important that young people see there is a future out there,” Mustello said. “You don't have to leave Pennsylvania anymore. It is right here for you.”

Mustello told the panel she wants vo-tech students to have the opportunity to tour local well pads, processing plants and other shale gas facilities to get a look at the jobs available in the industry.

Colby McBrien, a junior at Seneca Valley Senior High School, studies heavy equipment repair at the vo-tech.

“I learned that the energy companies are providing many jobs and not just in drilling and fracking, and they're going to be here for years to come,” Colby said of the briefing.

Cole Wiand, a junior at Karns City High School, was also excited about the \$67,000 average pay a panel member said exists at most well sites.

“It's a great thing,” said Cole, who plans to study diesel mechanics after high school. “It means fewer people on the streets and more people working.”

Joe Saeler of the Community Development Corporation of Butler County said the briefing was a good idea because it informs people about what's going on across the state. It also highlights the energy field and the new revenue it brings into community's private and public sectors.

Mark Gordon, the county's chief of planning and economic development, agreed with Spigelmyer's comments that while plastics have been stigmatized, it is better to produce them in the United States under stringent regulations than in China, where no environmental regulations exist.

“Sometimes, people tend to forget that manufacturers live in the same area, breathe the same air, drink the same water and eat the same food as everyone else,” Gordon said.

Spigelmyer said Western Pennsylvania's wells produce 60 percent of the ethane that will be used to manufacture plastics. Additionally, the Shell Cracker Plant being built in neighboring Beaver County is the second-largest construction site in the nation.

“I believe this area will be the next petrochemical hub,” Spigelmyer said.

Regarding the environmental impact of shale gas development, Spigelmyer said the 616 new wells in Pennsylvania last year saw 19,600 safety inspections. He stressed that the industry faces much higher scrutiny and standards than others.

“The goal of this whole event is to have you stop and think about energy,” Stark said. “The opportunities are tremendous.”



Paula Grubbs

 @PaulaJoGrubbs

Paula Grubbs is a Butler County native who has been with the Butler and Cranberry Eagle newspapers since June 2000. Grubbs has covered the Mars School District and Middlesex Township for over 20 years with the Eagle and her former employer, the Cranberry Journal. She also covers Adams Township, Evans City and Mars in addition to events and incidents throughout Southwestern Butler County as assigned. Grubbs has taken the lead at the Cranberry Eagle in reporting on shale gas development,

which has been a hotly debated topic in the recent past, both locally and nationally. A 1979 graduate of Butler Senior High School and a 1994 graduate of Geneva College, Grubbs has won a Golden Quill and four Keystone state awards, plus an award from the Society of Professional Journalists. Grubbs enjoys following the Penguins, Pirates and Steelers, volunteers with the Connoquenessing Creek Cleanup each summer, and loves spending time outdoors and bird watching at her Penn Township home. Grubbs is the daughter of James R. Davis Sr., of Center Township, and the late Maxine Davis. She has two grown children, Jacqueline and Thomas.
