

Cass County EDC hosts Legislative Forum in Walker

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The economy will be a top priority topic in the coming election months.

The Cass County Economic Development (EDC) hosted a 2010 legislative wrap-up June 17 in Walker. The goal of the discussion was to summarize the past session with emphasis on economic topics and build collaboration between business and government.

When asked to compare today's economy with that of a year ago, State Rep. Larry Howes, R-Walker, was optimistic, stating, "The outlook is pretty good. Minnesota added 5,600 jobs in May."

The comments by mayors, businesses and others in attendance was generally upbeat, with several stating that most businesses are handling spending carefully but are in a slightly better position than a year prior.

"Guardedly optimistic," was the comment of Rep. John Persell, DFL-Bemidji, summarizing his response to the same question. Keeping real estate taxes affordable is also concern, especially when trying to attract businesses. All agreed that Cass County has been successful in that endeavor. "The Cass County tax rate for commercial and industrial property is the third-lowest in the state, according to the Department of Revenue," stated Gail Levenson, executive director of the Cass County EDC. Residential tax rates have always been important to the county, as many residents are retired and unable to budget for an increase.

Howes agreed, stating, "My taxes actually went down this year."

"Developing good medical facilities will generate quality jobs and build a safe community for a retirement population," stated District 4

State Sen. Mary Olson, DFL-Bemidji, when asked how to best create and retain jobs.

"We should use creativity in economic development! A good example of that is developing businesses in the renewable energy industry," Persell added.

Streamlining government is a continuing discussion topic, according to Olson. She is strongly in favor of eliminating overlap in jurisdictions.

"It has even been suggested to eliminate state government," she commented.

In closing, Cass County Commissioner Jim Dowson, an attendee, asked what their legislative priorities were. Funding for education and balancing the budget were discussed at this time.

Olson said she would like to see taxes tied to a person's ability to pay. All agreed these are definitely difficult financial times.

All legislators complimented the work of the local fishing task force in bringing the walleye levels up on Leech Lake and improving the tourism industry.

"The tourism level is reasonable; there are cars in the restaurant parking lots," Persell stated.

This brings jobs to the northern region of their districts, all agreed.

In his concluding statement, Howes quoted pro angler Al Lindner as saying, "The [Leech] lake quality is better than it has been in years." Improving the environment is definitely an important factor in building and maintaining the tourism industry.

This was the second annual Legislative Forum sponsored by the Cass County EDC. The EDC is a community nonprofit corporation whose mission is to "improve the business environment of Cass County by encouraging a strong, diverse and sustainable economy and to build better relationships between business, government agencies and local communities."