

Osche conferences with nearby county leaders

Virtual talks focused on development ideas

Paula Grubbs Eagle Staff Writer

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Leslie Osche, Butler County commissioners chairwoman, was one of three commissioners from Southwestern Pennsylvania to discuss regional infrastructure and economic development investment Friday morning during the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce's monthly "First Friday" event.

Osche joined Diana Irey Vaughan, chairwoman of the Washington County Commissioners, and Sherene Hess, an Indiana County commissioner, for the discussion on the region's challenges, triumphs and goals regarding infrastructure and development.

In her opening statement, Osche said well-maintained and safe roads and highways, effective transit in key corridors, taking care of air and water, workforce issues, broadband internet access and enhancing agriculture through innovative farming techniques are top issues in Butler County.

Regarding the lack of internet access in rural areas, Irey Vaughan said Washington County Commissioners spent \$300,000 of the \$18 million in Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) funds to place broadband in 3,000 rural homes and add hot spots for virtual education in rural areas.

Hess said Indiana County spent a portion of its CARES funding on providing wireless network service in 150 homes, 200 businesses and three school districts.

Osche said a small business owner in the county led a pilot program in which connectivity devices were placed on communications towers in rural areas, and rural school districts were outfitted with internet hotspots.

She said one challenge is the ability of many families in the county's rural areas to afford the monthly fee associated with internet service if connectivity is provided.

“It's one thing to get it there, but it's another thing to see if people are going to spend the money to get it (in their homes and businesses)” Osche said.

She said the Southwest Pennsylvania Commission is taking the lead in the region on the issue of providing internet service in rural areas.

“We will follow the SPC's lead for broadband to address issues in those areas,” she said.

Another item of discussion during the forum was the workforce issue in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

Many employers have open positions, but cannot find employees to fill them.

Osche said she advocates for building a means for those in low-wage jobs to improve their skills, so they can get higher-paying positions.

Osche said the county is working with an organization from the Midwest to teach personal empowerment concepts, emotional intelligence and cognitive behavior concepts to allow those who are in low-wage jobs to improve their situations.

“We aren't building enough ladders for people effectively,” she said.

The three commissioners also said Southwest Pennsylvania receives less state funding than the central and eastern regions.

They also agreed that collaboration among counties is the best way to advocate for regional needs such as infrastructure, highways, transit and other issues.

“If we don't try to collectively make moves, it's difficult to do in a vacuum,” Osche said.

The First Friday event was held virtually, with all participants attending remotely.



Paula Grubbs

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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.
