

Warner: Area sets example for U.S.

Chamber holds Annual Meeting

May 22, 2008

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The kind of progress Henry County and Martinsville have seen in recent years is the kind of progress the United States needs for an economic turnaround, according to former governor Mark Warner.

The national economy can rebound if the government and all Americans put forth the same amount of effort that area residents have given to rebuild the local economy following shutdowns in the textile and furniture industries, Warner told local business and government leaders Wednesday night.

He was the keynote speaker Wednesday during the Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce's 49th Annual Meeting and Leadership Recognition Dinner at Chatmoss Country Club.

"It seems like you're pushing the rock uphill" sometimes, but Henry County and Martinsville are making economic progress, Warner said.

He recalled that with its manufacturing heritage, the community used to be Virginia's "economic engine" and "carried the state on its back in the 1950s and 1960s."

Also, he recalled that while he was governor from 2002 to 2006, about 3,200 jobs were created in the community.

In describing how the community has rallied to reverse economic troubles, Warner mentioned the effort put into launching the New College Institute, which aims to become a public four-year university.

The time and effort involved in launching a higher education institution has not been seen much across the nation, let alone elsewhere in Virginia, during recent decades, Warner indicated.

He also mentioned the new Virginia Museum of Natural History building on Starling Avenue, which has increased visitation at the museum and boosted local tourism-related economic development efforts, officials have said.

"You all deserve a round of applause ... and a lot of support" for efforts to revive the local economy, Warner said. "You've come a long, long way."

Warner, a Democrat, said candidly that like many area residents, he also is out of work and seeking a job — he is running for the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by Sen. John Warner, R-Va.

But forget about political party affiliations.

“To get our country fixed,” he said, “first and foremost we have to stop being Republicans and stop being Democrats and start being Americans.”

He added that he is tired of politics being driven by left-wing and right-wing extremists.

Warner pitched a six-step plan to raise U.S. economic competitiveness. The steps include:

- Changing the nation’s energy policy. “It makes no sense,” he said, that federal energy policy seems to be to borrow money from China to buy oil produced elsewhere in the world.

He added that he thinks some of that money ends up in terrorists’ hands.

Warner voiced support for developing alternative energy sources such as wind and solar power and biofuels. He thinks the energy industry will be the major job-producing industry of the future.

- Emphasizing the need for education to strengthen the work force. Efforts to retrain jobless workers must be stressed, as well as efforts to provide the same quality public education for children statewide.

A student in Martinsville or Henry County deserves the same quality of education as a student in burgeoning Fairfax County, he reasoned.

- Increasing government funding for research and development. The result of more research and development would be more innovation, Warner said.

He said the U.S. ranks only sixth in the world in terms of money spent on research and development as part of the Gross National Product.

- Improving access to health care. Having approximately 50 million Americans without health insurance is “morally wrong,” Warner said.

He said that everyone involved in providing and financing medical care must work together to cut costs and make quality care available to everyone.

- “Truth-telling about fiscal policy,” as Warner described it.

He said the equivalent of the “single worst tax increase” Americans face is “a dollar that continues to decline” in value.

Financially speaking, he said the federal government must “get its house in order” so Americans do not leave long-term debt to their children.

- Developing a long-term plan to rebuild infrastructure throughout the U.S.

Warner compared such a plan to the one President Eisenhower established in the 1950s to develop the interstate highway system. He mentioned that he supports the planned I-73 that is to be built through Henry County.

Warner said that no matter who is elected president in November, he thinks “we are going to get a fresh start” at increasing the nation’s prominence in the world economy.

When the governor entered the country club’s large banquet room, he immediately began walking from table to table, shaking hands and talking briefly with those attending the dinner.

He received standing ovations before and after his speech, plus several rounds of applause during his speech.

Jay Edelen, chairman-elect of the chamber’s board of directors, presented Warner with a gift basket.

Due to time constraints, the former governor was unable to attend the entire event.