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Holden addresses business leaders

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U.S. Rep. T. Timothy Holden touted alternative energy at an annual legislative luncheon with business leaders on Monday at the Pottsville Club.

The Saint Clair legislator told more than 50 members of the Northeast Pennsylvania Manufacturers and Employers Association that he hoped positions on two key committees would secure important resources for Schuylkill County.

“We believe it’s a golden opportunity,” Holden, D-17, told business leaders, saying as vice chairman of the House Agriculture Committee he hopes important progress can be made toward turning local resources into biodiesel and other alternative fuels.

Darlene J. Robbins, MAEA executive director, said the annual luncheon allows input and education on national issues.

“It’s the opportunity to discuss legislative issues with our members,” she said.

Holden said Monday he hopes \$6 billion in loan guarantees may help research and development into use of materials as diverse as switch grass, animal fat, soy beans and wood chips to help curb a 65 percent dependency on foreign energy.

The funds could be part of a new farm bill that in 2005 alone, the last year for which figures are available from the county farm services agency, delivered an estimated \$2.8 million in programs to local farmers.

The current legislation expires Sept. 30.

Efforts toward increased production of biodiesel and other alternative fuels are already moving ahead in the county.

Green Renewable Energy Ethanol and Nutrition, Emmaus, Pa., has proposed a new \$250 million to \$300 million ethanol production and distribution facility near Joliett with most functions coming online between the end of 2007 and the end of 2008.

In January, Holden said funding in the new farm bill would be aimed at development for figuring out new sources of ethanol and other agriculturally produced alternative fuels in Pennsylvania and nationwide.

Other alternative power projects that are either in the proposal stage or beginning operation in Schuylkill County include a \$700 million coal-to-oil plant proposed in Gilberton by Waste Management & Processors Inc., a project Holden said Monday he believes will move forward, and the already operating Locust Ridge Wind Farm in Mahanoy and East Union townships.

A 2002 farm bill allotted \$985 million to farmland preservation, with Pennsylvania receiving the second-highest amount of funding in the nation after Maryland due to heavy development pressures in the state.

An estimated 8,000 acres in Schuylkill County are currently enrolled in a Conservation Reserve Program that devotes land to conservation uses funded through the 2002 farm bill. The bill also contains programs controlling food production by providing benefits for farmers when farm produce falls below target commodity prices, and disaster relief for farmers experiencing loss following drought, flood or hurricane.

However, on Monday, Holden said the bill also provides important funds for rural development programs that have been used locally for funding of everything from sewage treatment projects to firefighting equipment.

The sewer projects alone, Holden said, help clean up the environment and attract economic development.

As a ranking Pennsylvania delegate on the House Transportation Committee, Holden said he is also hopeful of bringing more transportation funding home after he said a previous transportation bill brought \$16 million in investment to the county.



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