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The gas industry story has two prongs

November 23, 2010

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On the same day last week that state and business officials were trumpeting employment generated by the gas industry, a Pennsylvania rules panel was approving new gas-drilling environmental safeguards.

In our view, that is precisely how this story should play out robust economic opportunity partnered with heightened environmental consciousness for the related concerns of natural gas production.

On the economic front, many of those at the hearing of the Senate Majority Policy Committee in Williamsport illustrated factually just how much impact on local employment the industry is having and can have in the future.

While detractors of the industry have tried to downplay the local employment impact, the numbers tell a different tale.

The Penn College Marcellus Shale and Education Center has trained more than 1,000 students in the past 10 months on natural gas-specific issues and 800 of them already are employed in the industry.

A manager for Chesapeake Energy Corp. said the company has expanded its statewide workforce from 250 to more than 1,100 in the past year, with many of those jobs in Bradford County, where the majority of its operations are located.

Universal Well Services has hired 68 people from Williamsport since January and plans to double that total in 2011.

In many cases, the key to the employment is the local workers themselves understanding the skilled and unskilled job descriptions as well as the different mindset, work ethic and work schedule that comes with employment in the industry.

But the employment is clearly there, as well as the spinoff economic impact on hotels, restaurants, retailers and other businesses.

Of course, all this is contingent on the gas industry being a solid environmental citizen. While there have been environmental concerns and a few violations in the first few years of the industry's presence in the state, the incident rate is actually low given the amount of activity going on. Tougher safety standards approved last week by the Independent Regulatory Commission can only help.

With a world-class environment to protect in the largely rural drilling area for the industry, the environmental standards must be tough by necessity. As long as enforcement of regulations is fair, we can protect the state's water supply while enjoying once-in-a-generation economic development. People on both sides of the equation need to understand the ultimate benefit for Pennsylvania and its people will be greatest if the economic-environmental equation is met every day.

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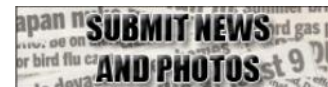
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