East Texas Coalition Makes Its Voice Heard in Austin

More than 125 people interested in how issues decided in Austin affect Northeast Texas took time out of their schedules to spend a couple of days in the state capital. The focus was based on the 2017 joint public policy statements of Longview, Tyler and Kilgore Chambers of Commerce, focusing on areas such as education, employment relations, energy and economic development, environmental quality and water, business, health care, legal and judicial reform, and transportation and infrastructure.

That’s a lengthy agenda, particularly with several items under each category; too lengthy to detail in this piece. The policy statements are available on the chamber’s website: longviewchamber.com. After listening to and talking with a dozen state and association officials who work with these issues every day, it is clear that our voice is being heard in Northeast Texas. In addition, our area legislators spanning from the Gulf Coast to Texarkana were there to meet with members of the coalition, as were numerous appellate judges and others who work to pass legislation that impacts all of us to some degree.

We were gratified to have such a strong representation of state agency heads and association chiefs eager to tell us what they are working on, and how it affects the Northeast Texas economy. An economy, we learned, that would make it the 44th largest state in the nation. As one speaker joked, “Don’t get any ideas.”

Joking aside, it is obvious we can accomplish more if we stand united on these important issues. Take highways, for example. The Texas Department of Transportation plans to spend $200 million in the Tyler district, which includes Gregg County. That includes extending Toll 49 north of Lindale; a road many of us now use when traveling to Austin to avoid driving through Tyler traffic. It also expands Highway 42 at White Oak to four lanes all the way to Interstate 20, improving a well-traveled route.

Oil and gas production is a huge issue in East Texas and remains one of our major economic engines. As state Representative Jay Dean put it, “Oil and gas carries the lumber when it comes to revenue” for the state. The same is true for area cities that have seen reductions in their sales tax revenue, as we have seen during this recent downturn. Prices are beginning to rebound and production increase, which is critical to the area economy.

A competitive workforce is vital to our future growth. Andres Alcantar, chairman of the Texas Workforce Commission, told the delegation that a new tool, LaunchMyCareerTX.com, is being used to help students, parents, high-school counselors and non-profit agencies prepare students for life after high school. The Longview Chamber of Commerce now provides a page on its website to access this program.
Health care remains a key issue for Northeast Texans, with the majority of health care now paid for by government payers, primarily Medicare and Medicaid. Mary Elizabeth Jackson with CHRISTUS Trinity Mother Frances, spoke about the challenges and opportunities ahead. She stressed that health care is a “big ship” and implementing whatever will follow the Affordable Care Act will not take place immediately; it will take time.

The most important aspect of our coalition going to Austin is the relationships that are formed with the state’s decision makers in the areas covered in the Chambers’ policy statements. When bills come up, or initiatives are undertaken, it is valuable to be able to put a face with a name. Rest assured that the voice of area business will continue to be heard in Austin on the many issues that affect our economy, our residents, and our future.

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