

BUSINESS

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Region's businesses lobby D.C.

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Roman

Business leaders in Cleveland and Akron have joined colleagues across the Great Lakes to push an economic agenda in Washington, D.C.

They want new federal policy and funds to build transportation hubs, pump up research, attract foreign talent and ease movement of goods at the Canadian border, among other goals.

More than 30 chambers of commerce — representing 90,000 businesses from eastern Minnesota to western New York — support “A Business Agenda for Economic Transformation in the Great Lakes Region.”

“It’s the most sustained and promising effort among the chambers that I’ve seen,” said Joe Roman, executive director of the Greater Cleveland Partnership, this area’s largest chamber of commerce.

“I think we are realizing how similar our challenges and strategies are.”

As the vanguard of a community’s business leadership, chambers of commerce typically have the ear of their federal elected leaders.

Focusing their lobbying clout across common needs “is absolutely critical and a tremendous opportunity,” Roman said.

SEE LAKES | C6

LAKES

FROM C1

Chambers unite to promote region

The effort spins out of the 2-year-old initiative to revive the Great Lakes region, spearheaded by the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, which crafts and advocates city-building strategies.

Brookings views the Great Lakes region as all or part of 12 states, including Ohio, where 97 million people inhabit a dynamic yet struggling economic landscape.

Buffeted by global competition, the mega-region is trying to find its economic footing.

Chamber leaders gathered in the Detroit area in February and decided to launch an election-year lobby for “what’s important to help this region succeed. It’s about working together, instead of against each other, in achieving economic transformation,” said John Austin, a fellow at Brookings and a member of the Michigan Board of Education.

The effort has already paid off, business leaders said.

Congress quickly passed, and President Bush signed this month, the Great Lakes Water Compact, which bans diversion of Great Lakes water. And both presidential candidates have pledged support for ongoing cleanup of the Great Lakes.

The chambers were among business and environmental groups that pushed for the commitments.

Business leaders believe renewed vitality in the mega-region lies in five key areas. Their agenda centers on:

■ **Transportation policy.** The federal government has failed to craft a transportation policy that responds to global, just-in-time demands, according to the Great Lakes business agenda.

Chambers want more money to improve links among ports, rail lines, roads and airports.

Officials at Cleveland’s port have been pushing the same agenda. They believe the port is underused as a way to move goods on the Great Lakes and through the St. Lawrence Seaway.

On land, the chambers will urge for funding of high-speed passenger rail between Great Lakes cities, to ease traffic and

pollution.

■ **Easing congestion at the Canadian border.**

Each day, thousands of people and \$1.2 billion of goods — a chunk of it from Ohio — move between the United States and Canada, according to the business agenda.

Too often, that traffic is delayed beyond reason, particularly in the Detroit-Windsor area. Delays worsened considerably in the high-security aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001.

Business leaders want the federal government to reopen talks with Canada on border-crossing policy, technology and procedures, with the goal of waits no longer than 15 minutes.

■ **Attracting immigrant talent.** The region is losing skilled workers to retirements and brain drain.

It needs unique skills to accelerate promising industries, such as advanced energy and biomedicine.

To fill the gaps, business leaders want the federal government to try high-skill immigration zones in cities like Cleveland.

Visa caps would be lifted for foreigners who fill job shortages in critical areas, such as information technology and nursing, said Daniel Berry, a senior vice president at the Greater Cleveland Partnership.

He helped shape the chambers’ immigration agenda and is among civic leaders who are pushing to attract more foreign talent to Greater Cleveland.

■ **Fostering innovation.** Business honchos want the federal government to pump more money into research and provide matching funds for state programs.

That would include efforts like Ohio’s Third Frontier Project, which is funneling \$1.6 billion into development of high-tech companies.

The Great Lakes region needs more federal support for research in clean energy, sustainable transportation and life sciences, the agenda said.

Business leaders seek a “National Innovation Foundation,” which would promote technology commercialization, regional clustering of industries and tighter, more dynamic research partnerships between industry and universities.

■ **Protecting the Great Lakes and enhancing business prospects related to water quality.**

Chamber heads are calling on the new president and Congress to fund half of the \$26 billion Great Lakes Restoration Strategy.

The strategy, proposed three years ago, seeks to control invasive species, stanch sewage contamination, clean up toxic waste sites and restore shorelines.

The plan estimates a \$50 billion economic benefit from the cleanup.

The Great Lakes business agenda can be viewed at detroitchamber.com/docs/bizagenda.pdf.

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