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■ State Rep. Andy Thompson, R-Marietta (right), and Carroll County Commissioners Thomas Wheaton (left to right), Robert Wirkner and Jeffrey Ohler meet at Willbros Construction during an economic development tour of three counties Friday.

State Rep. Thompson gets tour of Carroll development

BY SHANE HOOVER
GateHouse Ohio Media

CARROLLTON Utica Shale drilling has filled Carroll County's coffers and paved its roads, but hurdles remain as the community tries to turn its recent oil and natural gas boom into long-term economic development.

Local officials and business leaders apprised State Rep. Andy Thompson, R-Marietta, of the county's strengths, weaknesses and priorities during Thompson's economic development tour Friday of Carroll, Harrison and Belmont counties.

"The goal is to help us learn what we need to know about what is going on in Carroll County," Thompson said.

His 95th District is at the heart of Ohio's Utica Shale region, and comprises Carroll, Harrison and Noble counties along with portions of Belmont and Washington counties.

PROS AND CONS

Carroll County has 52 of the 102 producing Utica wells, and accounts for 40 percent the 711 drilling permits, according to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. The county is also home to pipeline and processing projects that will take the gas to customers.

Shale drilling has brought positives to Carroll County, officials said. They noted the \$40 million in road upgrades paid for by drillers, the 31 percent increase in sales tax revenue and the opportunity to recruit former residents back to the

At the same time, inflated rental rates are squeezing low- and middle-income families, increased traffic is wearing out state routes and students need more education and guidance to prepare them for jobs in the oil and gas industry.

Some residents view what's happening as the best of times, for others it's the worst of times, said County Commissioner Robert Wirkner, who asked what happens when the county has to pay for expanded services and the drillers and pipeline builders have moved on.

WATER AND SEWER

One of the biggest issues for the county is a lack of widespread water and sewer service. Not having the infrastructure makes it hard for the county to attract new businesses, including a sought after gas-fired electric power plant, and increases the difficulty of keeping existing companies.

"The economic impact is huge from water and sewer," said Aaron Dodds, the county's new economic development director.

The county is planning to connect existing water and sewer systems in Malvern and Carrollton along a northern corridor, but the cost would be \$16 million. Internet and cellphone service and rail lines also need to be upgraded.

If the county doesn't make those improvements, it risks a situation where companies extract its natural resources without investing in the local economy, Dodds said.

"I just ask for your help, and it comes down to money," County Commissioner Thomas Wheaton told Thompson and other state officials at the meeting.

WILLBROS

Even with those challenges, companies are finding a home in Carroll County.

The meeting took place in what soon will be the local field office for Willbros Construction, a global contractor specializing in building and maintaining energy infrastructure, including pipelines.

The business is one of at least 30 new companies that have located in the county, said Amy Rutledge, director of the Carroll County Chamber of Commerce.

The Willbros office at 32 W. Main St. is being renovated. The floors were bare and the rooms smelled of new drywall. The company plans to have 15 workers in the office by the end of the year, said Vice President and General Manager Mike Futch.

Willbros already has 775 employees working on pipeline projects in Carroll County, including 133 from Ohio, 139 from Pennsylvania and 48 from states in the Ohio River basin, he said.

Since January, the company has spent \$20 million in Carroll County, \$16 million of it on subcontractors, of which 75 percent are from Ohio, he said.

The Utica Shale has given the company a chance to compete in this state, not just with pipeline construction, but maintenance as well.

"We're going to be here a while," Futch said.