

Valley News Dispatch March 24, 2011

Western Pennsylvania can be to energy what it once was to the steel industry, says U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire.

The region needs to capitalize on its resources, whether it's natural gas extracted from Marcellus shale, tapping coal reserves or leading the way in the development of nuclear power in spite of what's happening in Japan, Altmire said during a town hall meeting Wednesday night attended by about 80 people.

Altmire (D-McCandless) said he hears about Marcellus shale everywhere he goes.

"This is the greatest economic opportunity we have ever had, with maybe the exception of the steel industry," Altmire said. "We need to take advantage of the fact we have this huge economic opportunity."

Marcellus shale and energy traded time with federal spending and questions about the budget deficit over the course of the two-hour session.

A show of hands found only six in favor of placing a moratorium on Marcellus shale drilling, as has been done in New York State.

Although Gov. Tom Corbett is against taxing the industry, Altmire said gas companies have told him they budget with the expectation that they will be taxed at some point.

Pennsylvania needs to train its work force so its own residents can get the jobs the industry will create, Altmire said.

Tens of thousands of Marcellus wells have been drilled without affecting the water or air, but

there is still a role for oversight, he said. "It has been proven you can do it safely," he said.

Altmire pointed to Westinghouse and the jobs it has created in the nuclear industry. The disaster in Japan is due to two natural disasters and "bad planning," he said. Nuclear energy, Altmire said, still needs to be considered part of the nation's energy future.

"We have everything here in Western Pennsylvania," he said. "We should be to energy what we used to be to the steel industry."

The conflict in Libya came up briefly, with Altmire saying the United States is treading into dangerous territory in essentially taking sides in a civil war.

However, he said, "I think we're doing the right thing."

Several speakers stressed that federal spending and the national debt should be a top concern.

Altmire said he and other lawmakers are taking steps to address it. He said lawmakers have frozen their pay, cut their office budgets and not taken cost of living adjustments.

Lawmakers have the same health insurance choices as other federal employees, which Altmire said he has elected not to take.

Altmire said he has given back to the Treasury \$500,000 from his office budget that wasn't spent.

Altmire called it "healthy" that debate has changed from how much government will spend to how much can be cut. He said savings could be found in eliminating duplication of programs across agencies and improving efficiency.

Altmire said there is some spending that should not be cut, such as higher education funding, veterans programs and border security.

Continuing a resident's euphemism, Altmire said he doesn't favor a "machete" approach to budget cuts.

"I don't want to haphazardly cut important programs," he said. "I don't want to eat the seed corn. There are things we need to invest in."