

Representatives visit Pittsburgh to talk up trade

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By Bill Toland, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

Susie Christensen, Pennsylvania's trade representative for Australia and New Zealand, meets with local businessmen at the Regional Enterprise Tower. Eight overseas Pennsylvania trade representatives met with local businesses interested in doing business overseas at a series of meetings.

When sales and earnings are down domestically -- and they are, for just about everybody -- a company has two choices: hunker down and wait for existing customers to start buying again, or go looking for new customers in new places.

Yesterday, representatives from countries in Europe, South America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East were urging Western Pennsylvania companies to take a hard look at choice No. 2. Exporting products and talent to growing economies can help companies in Pennsylvania and the Pittsburgh region survive the recession, they said.

Even last year as the economy was souring, Pennsylvania's exports grew to \$34 billion, 18 percent over 2007's numbers. Export value grew nationally as well, largely because the weakening dollar made American-made goods, from electronics to blue jeans, more affordable.

Even so, Pennsylvania still exceeded the national export growth rate of 12 percent. The Pittsburgh region's export value has been growing, too, over the last decade, from \$6.8 billion in 2005 to \$8.2 billion in 2006 to \$9.8 billion in 2007, the last year for which local data is available.

Nationally, exports accounted for 13 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product in 2008, up from 9.5 percent in 2003 and 5.3 percent in 1968.

The meet-and-greet session, staged locally by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, was the first of what will be an ongoing series of statewide meetings on international trade. This meeting focused on energy and power generation, as will the rest of this week's meetings in Erie, Hershey, Wilkes-Barre, Bethlehem and Exton.

The state's Department of Community and Economic Development and Office of International Business Development are organizing the meetings. "We've spent a lot of time and effort finding new markets for Pennsylvania businesses," said DCED spokesman, Steve Weitzman. In many cases, foreign investment "makes more sense now than it used to."

Canada and Mexico are still the region's biggest trade partners, but trade representatives from Saudi Arabia, Israel, Chile and elsewhere were pitching for a piece of the pie. Mona Helmy, Saudi Arabia's trade emissary to Pennsylvania, said a sluggish U.S. economy often means more inquiries abroad. "My office, actually, we are busier than we were before."

Pennsylvania now accounts for \$237 million in exports to South Africa, said Richard Zurba, Pennsylvania liaison from the Southern Africa Trade Office. And Chile's Sergio Kalm said Pennsylvania's exports to his country have increased by 227 percent since 2004, when a new trade agreement went into effect.

Yesterday, the pitches were largely tailored toward the theme of the meeting -- energy and power, areas where Pennsylvania, with its expertise in mining, manufacturing and nuclear power, can help. Emerging economies, especially those in South America and the Middle East, also need help with security, mass transit and water desalination.

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