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Body

Leaders elected by Southeast Kansas offered on Friday afternoon a frank assessment: This year's gonna be tough.

The Pittsburg Area Chamber of Commerce, with the sponsorship of Pittsburg State, hosted Rep.-elect Chuck Smith, R-Pittsburg, Rep. Adam Lusker, D-Frontenac, Rep. Rich Proehl, R-Parsons, and state Sen. Jake LaTurner, R-Pittsburg at Pitt State's Wilkinson Alumni Center.

Jake LaTurner

LaTurner said he's looked forward to the chance to discuss the issues facing the state with the public, but went right into Kansas' current fiscal crisis.

"A tax package that no one advocated for is law in Kansas now," he said. "To not take a serious look at that is irresponsible. We're also going to have to look at the spending side of things. I do want to say that fanaticism on either side doesn't hold the answer."

LaTurner said that tax cuts adopted in 2012 reflected what "everyone agreed philosophically" in Topeka to be a good idea, taken to too far an extreme.

Senate leadership had aimed to cut taxes by \$50 million, Gov. Sam Brownback aimed for a \$300 million reduction and the Kansas House of Representatives pushed for \$400 million, he said. But an inability to compromise, LaTurner said, caused \$600 million in cuts to make it into law.

He cited the \$279 million revenue shortfall this fiscal year and the 4 percent cut to nearly every part of the state general fund except education as consequences of this policy.

"Most of those solutions are not very good in my estimation," he said of the cuts and of a roughly \$100 million allotment from the state's highway fund, while noting that money for a planned expansion of U.S. Highway 69 is not connected to the highway fund and remains in place.

"They've gone to great lengths to say that Highway 69 funding is there," LaTurner said. "But like many in Southeast Kansas, my position has been 'You don't trust it until you see it.' We're going to have to make sure that funding stays where it needs to be."

There is some cause for optimism, he added.

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"I apologize that it's not sunshine and rainbows. The tax cut is working, though," LaTurner said, referencing several cases where he's spoken with area business owners and heard that the tax savings have helped them invest more money in the economy and hire more workers.

Chuck Smith

Smith said he's looking forward to working on the Education, Children and Families, Public Safety and Transportation committees.

"Those things are very important to me," he said. "I'm excited about hearing what [fellow legislators] have to say. I'm proud to serve Pittsburg, to serve all of you."

Smith did not speak on issues beyond saying he is a supporter of education and pledging to defend funding for it at the K-12 and postsecondary level.

"I'm a public school grad myself, so I'm for our public schools," he said. "I had seven children graduate from Pittsburg State, so of course I'd do anything I can for it. We're an education family, so I consider education important."

Adam Lusker

Lusker said it's his goal to keep a positive attitude about the upcoming year, focusing on constructive legislation beyond resolving the state's fiscal crisis. However, he said, it may be hard.

"You can put a laundry list of negative things that are before us," Lusker said. "What we'll have to do is go to work and try to solve some of the problems that have happened."

Lusker criticized Speaker Ray Merrick, R-Stilwell, who recently said that a "spending problem" is among the state's top concerns as the fiscal crisis must be dealt with.

"I have to ask him, where's the problem? Much of what we're spending is necessary," he said. "Nobody wants to raise taxes, but we have to be responsible. Being conservative and responsible are two overlapping meanings. We have to follow both principles."

Lusker discussed the across-the-board cuts that were made to fill the \$279 million shortfall in 2014.

"We've already made cuts. The governor came up with a way to make cuts this year," he said. "They affect everyone that has anything to do with the state government and not in a positive manner ... We need to make improvements because that's an investment in the economy. That's not a 'spending problem,' that's a necessity."

Rich Proehl

Proehl said transportation is a top issue for him, saying it is "near and dear to my heart."

"I'm going to fight for every dime for SEK," he said. "We have to watch that each and every day or else it will gravitate toward the more high-population areas."

Proehl referenced that Lusker will serve as the ranking minority member of the Transportation committee, and pledged to work with him across the partisan divide.

"I welcome him," he said. "I think it's going to make it better for everyone."

An issue that Proehl called special attention to is the availability of commercial driver's licenses, needed by many professional drivers, chiefly semi trailer drivers.

"There's a backlog. It takes a long time, and they're having to drive far," he said. "They may drive 150 miles to take the CDL test and they may find they've got too many and can't drive that day. We're going to look at doing some privatization on that and help solve that problem."

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An issue that Proehl said he is "not looking forward to" is the question of temporary driver's licenses for people who are undocumented.

"It's a very big issue in western Kansas," he said. "There are a lot of people driving out there without a license, without a registration, without a social security number. It's a huge problem."

Proehl also touched on the budget.

"We're going to have to look at that this year," he said. "We've got to do some tweaking on the budget. We've opened up a rather large hole and it's pretty difficult to fill right now."

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