

January 18, 2013

More than 800 people attend Wooster Area Chamber of Commerce's annual meeting

WOOSTER — The more than 800 attendees of the Wooster Area Chamber of Commerce's annual meeting Thursday might know Wayne Insurance Group was Business of the Year and Jerry Baker was named to the Wall of Fame.

But, they definitely walked away knowing it did not snow or rain during the annual recognition dinner at the Greenbriar Conference & Party Centre.

The fact that it did not snow was a running theme throughout the night, as well as the constant mispronunciation of Pat Neyhart's last name (he is the outgoing chairman of the chamber board). For the record, the first syllable of his last name rhymes with nigh, not nay.

Lt. Gov. Mary Taylor addressed the group about the state's Common Sense Initiative, an effort to improve regulations so that there is a balance between protecting Ohioans and not harming businesses.

As Taylor looked over the room, which was packed from wall to wall, she said she had been to several chamber dinners, but never one like Wooster's.

The tradition of another theme, an annual one established at the 2006 annual meeting when United Titanium was Business of the Year, was back again, courtesy of Baker. At that 2006 event, United Titanium President Mike Reardon had been encouraged to keep his comments brief. Well, ever since then, there is generally a comment made regarding a speech's length, and it is nearly always linked with Reardon.

When Baker prepared to deliver his comments, he told the crowd not to worry because Reardon helped him write it.

Before the event, Tod Carmony, president of Wayne Insurance, said he had received the Reardon speech from the Chamber: Keep it short.

Carmony did keep his comments brief. After accepting the press plates, he thanked the Chamber for recognizing the company that has surpassed the century mark. A company does not get to be 100 years old without dedicated people working and supporting it. "The board, management and staff greatly appreciate it," he said.

During a reception before the event, Carmony said he felt like a rhinestone cowboy, receiving cards and letters from people he doesn't even know.

"But, it is nice for the company to be recognized, especially for the people who have worked there 30, 40 years; these are local people," Carmony said.

Baker was touched by the honor. He grew up in Appalachia, and he lost his father due to the coal mines when he was 5 years old. He grew up with his mother and two sisters, and said it was tough, and it toughened him.

A plaque on Baker's desk reads, "Bloom where you are planted." He told the group he was so proud to be planted in Wooster because he loves the community.

"Thank you for supporting me," Baker said. He thanked his family, employees, associates and partners, Jim Snyder and Jim Jones, for their support. When he and his partners undertook the development of the north end, people were betting it would not last six months, he said. "It's been 22 years, and it's still growing."

"I think the honor is well-deserved," Mayor Bob Breneman said of Baker's recognition. "He has given a lot of time, money and sweat equity in Wooster."

"For economic development in the city of Wooster, Jerry Baker has been second to none," said Jon Ansel, A Wooster councilman and president of D+S Transportation. "Without his vision, Wooster's north end would not be what it is."

Dee Vaidya, president of RDM Equipment Co., was introduced as the incoming chairman of the Chamber board. The Chamber is looking forward to launching two new initiatives, he said. One is an annual Wooster Business Forum, which will be modeled after the World Business Forum in New York. Vaidya envisions the forum becoming the most influential gathering for chief executive officers and other top executives in Northeast Ohio. The other initiative is to develop a work force educational program.

The evening also provided the opportunity for Neyhart to commend Jeff Griffin, past president of the Chamber, for his service. Griffin stepped down at the end of 2012 to pursue a career in the financial services sector.

And, Vaidya welcomed new Chamber President Justin Starlin. Vaidya said earlier in the evening he had big shoes to fill in succeeding Neyhart as chairman, but he was looking forward to the opportunity to work with Starlin, "who will make my job easier."

The Mike Lezak Award for Volunteer Service was presented to Jeff Smith of the Apple Creek Banking Co. in recognition of the many hours he dedicates as a Chamber volunteer.

Lydia Thompson received the Jack O'Donnell Award for Community Service. She was recognized for her many contributions to the community through volunteerism and her enthusiasm for the Wooster area.

ServiceMaster Professional Cleaning was recognized as the 2012 Small Business of the Year (10 or more employees) and Summit Wood Industries was the 2012 Small Business of the Year (10 and fewer employees).

ArtiFlex received the Wayne Economic Development Council's Quality Growth Award.