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## Town Hall meeting fuels need for national energy independence

By BEN SNYDER



[view](#) A panel of national energy experts and prominent politicians discussed America's need for a comprehensive energy policy at a Tuesday afternoon meeting in Titusville's Drake's Well Museum. At the podium is U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum.

**8/14/02** - The United States' dependence on foreign energy supplies is a major threat to national security – and big part of why Pennsylvania's economy has become so sluggish in recent years.

That was the consensus at Tuesday's Town Hall meeting at the Drake's Well Museum in Titusville, attended by several prominent politicians from the state and federal level, along with a nationally-recognized expert on fossil fuels and the Assistant Secretary of Fossil Energy for the U.S. Department of Energy.

"To be dependent on (the Middle East) for so much of our energy is insane... I think its the number one issue facing this country," said Rep. John Peterson, R-Fifth. "I think it just shows us that we've got to get an energy policy together and we've got to do it soon."

Sen. Rick Santorum, the third-ranking Republican member of the U.S. Senate, echoed many of Peterson's concerns. He said that, while the

Senate has passed an energy bill, the bill falls far short of what is needed.

"We need a comprehensive energy plan, we need a balance (of energy sources), and we need it soon," said Santorum. "We had an opportunity here in the Senate to do that... We didn't get that accomplished."

Santorum said the bill favored by Republicans in the Senate would have created jobs by encouraging new drilling and exploration for

domestic energy sources like oil, natural gas and coal – including controversial exploration in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Teamsters Union has estimated that the energy plan proposed by President Bush would create 735,000 jobs nationwide, including 34,000 jobs in Pennsylvania.

One of the most important sources of domestic energy, coal, is particularly important to Pennsylvania’s economy. Nearly 60 percent of the electricity produced nationally is currently generated by coal, much of which comes from Pennsylvania. New technologies being developed at Penn State University’s Energy Institute could increase the usefulness of coal, allowing it to be refined into products like jet fuel that have traditionally been produced only from crude oil.

Peterson claimed that the Clinton administration had under-utilized America’s coal resources, but said he hopes the Bush administration will not make the same decisions.

“I hope the bias against coal is over, because I think we are the Saudi Arabia of coal,” said Peterson.

Dr. Harold Schobert, director of The Energy Institute at Penn State, cautiously agreed with Peterson’s assessment, saying that Pennsylvania’s energy resources could make it an important source for domestic energy.

“We think that the potential exists for Pennsylvania to become the energy state,” said Schobert.

The resources to which he was referring include not just traditional fuels like coal, oil, and natural gas, but also byproducts of timber harvesting (like the low-grade wood used by International Paper of Erie until it closed recently) and agriculture that are being increasingly utilized in energy production. Schobert said that using those materials could stimulate the agricultural and timber industries that have been a staple of Pennsylvania’s economy for many years while generating industry – and power – in new areas. Using non-traditional sources of energy that are available in the United States could also reduce its dependence on foreign oil, an important national security goal. Currently 60 percent of the oil used in the United States comes from foreign countries, many of them Arab states that could respond negatively to an American invasion of Iraq. Back in the 1970’s, when an Arab oil embargo prompted by U.S. support of Israel led to a major depression, the U.S. imported only 32 percent of the oil it used from foreign sources. An embargo now could potentially have twice the effect on the economy that the one 30 years ago did – not a bright prospect with the economy already on the rocks.

“We could end up with very, very severe economic consequences,”

said Santorum.

State Sen. Mary Jo White, however, urged caution in developing new sources of fuel. She said that it would be silly to blindly jump from traditional fuels to unproven new ones, likening it to wing-walkers, the daredevils who walk on the wings of flying aircraft. She said that the first rule of wing-walkers is to never let go of one solid thing before grabbing onto another.

"That always seemed to me to be a good rule, not just for wing walking but for moving our country forward," said White.

But while it isn't here yet, the day when those new energy sources are stable enough to support the energy demands of the United States may come relatively soon, according to Assistant Secretary of Fossil Energy Mike Smith.

"Alternative energy will become more efficient in the future, especially for people in remote locations," said Smith.

One member of the audience, Tom Martin, a Libertarian who is running as Peterson's sole challenger in the upcoming general election, pressed the issue of new energy source development and technology. He said the United States should implement some sort of dollar for dollar funding to support private sector research in the area.

Peterson strongly criticized the idea, however, saying that Martin's simplistic view that anybody that can do research should be rewarded is "a pie in the sky."

Peterson was supported in his assessment of the idea by Schobert, who said that Australia had already tried the idea.

"It was an absolute, total, unmitigated catastrophe," said Schobert.

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