

Energy secretary tours plant site

BY MALLORY PANUSKA

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Local officials want Charles Snavelly to be their champion in Frankfort as they work to obtain the next level of federal cleanup funds for the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant and try to lift a statewide moratorium on building new nuclear facilities.

That was the message Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce President Sandra Wilson wanted to relay to Snavelly, secretary of the state Energy and Environment Cabinet, during a visit Wednesday to Paducah.

“After he took office in 2016 we immediately started in trying to build that relationship so he could learn more about who we are in Paducah and about our community and McCracken County,” Wilson said. “We always felt that we are a unique community and a wonderful community.”

Wilson, Mayor Gayle Kaler and other community leaders invited Snavelly to Paducah during a trip to Frankfort in February. He and his wife took them up on the invitation Wednesday and toured the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant site, met local citizens and saw the local area.

“He spent the day at the DOE site touring the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant because that is one of the most critical employers for us and it is very important that we continue that fight for that funding every year,” Wilson said. “And we want him to be our champion and we knew he needed to see the site.”

After the tour, Snavelly briefly addressed a group of Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce officials and other leaders at the Country Club of Paducah.

Snavelly, a former coal official hailing from eastern Kentucky, said he enjoyed seeing the plant and pointed out the similarities between the western McCracken County site and the coal mining communities he’s used to working in and around.

“It’s amazing to me the scale of that facility and the community and camaraderie that is felt by the people who work at that place,” he said. “It’s similar to me to what I’ve seen in the coal mining communities. They’re owned by a company and everybody worked at that facility, and down the road it would eventually close and some disappeared but they lived on through the history. I saw that love and camaraderie, and I’m proud of what you have done there.”

Snavelly also discussed the need for alternative industries to run parallel to the cleanup work at the site.

“I’m kind of an efficiency person so I like to see our money spent wisely there and actually used for productive purposes,” he said. “And that generally translates to cleaning things up faster, and at the same time you develop alternative uses either for that site or other sites. I think the people here have great imaginations and other opportunities besides that.”

He recognized the highly specialized skills of the workforce as well, which he believes will serve as an asset when tapping into the potential alternatives for the future.

“There’s so much similarity between this part of the state and the eastern part of the state,” Snavely explained. “There are a lot of people whose facilities aren’t operating anymore and who have great skill sets but it’s a matter of geographic displacement trying to match up the job and the job growth with the skilled workforce. You probably have better opportunity for that in western Kentucky than eastern Kentucky. I think you’ve got a lot of opportunity both at the plant site and the surrounding area with alternatives.”

Snavely said he needs to perform more research and learn more before determining exactly what types of alternatives are out there. But he vowed to keep up on conversations and stay involved to get to that point.