The 2017 All For Ohio Tour wrapped up with the final stops at our member companies. These visits facilitated important policy conversations among our members, state policymakers and the Ohio Chamber, while also allowing us to see firsthand what our members are up to.

THIRD STOP

GESMV’s mission is to empower people with disabilities and other disadvantages to achieve independence and improve their quality of life. Last year alone, it served 20,560 people in 23 counties, made possible by a team of 1,300 employees and nearly 1,000 volunteers.

Goodwill Easter Seals Miami Valley CEO and President Lance W. Detrick led the facility tour to kick off the visit, taking us through the spaces where they focus on specific services for participants. Visiting Ohio legislators then had the opportunity to talk to program participants.

A roundtable discussion among Goodwill staff from around the state, Ohio Chamber staff and Ohio legislators followed. Emily Turner, executive director of the Ohio Association of Goodwill Industries, voiced a concern that there are not enough workers with the qualified soft skills to obtain and retain jobs. Because job training and placement are a crucial part of what GESMV helps its participants with, workforce development is a key policy issue to help the success of the organization, as well as Ohio’s business climate as a whole. Among the successes in Ohio’s workforce development, there is still room for continued growth and improvement.

FOURTH STOP
On Sept. 12, Williams Co. hosted the next stop of our tour. A member since March 2016, Williams invited us to tour its Utica East Ohio (UEO) Harrison Hub facility in Scioto. UEO is dedicated to developing infrastructure for the gathering, processing and fractionation of natural gas and natural gas liquids (NGL). Rep. Andy Thompson from Ohio House District 95 participated as well.

The first part of the visit included a facility tour of the Kilgore Compressor Station, located in Carroll County, a site it has maintained since December 2013. Following a safety check, Williams staff led the group on a walking tour around the property to see the working parts that make what they do possible, including eight compressor units made by Ohio’s Ariel Corp., filters and scrubbers that remove water, hydrocarbons or other impurities from the gas and cooling systems.

A presentation and policy discussion followed the first leg of the visit. Topics included environmental permits and requirements to continue construction and facilitation of the company’s sites, as well as the need for qualified workers. While Williams continues to work with schools to help educate students to better prepare potential workers, there is still concern about finding enough skilled workers to fill jobs and pass drug tests.

The trip concluded with a driving tour of the UEO Harrison Hub Facility, a fractionation plant in Harrison County where NGLs are separated and shipped via trucks, rail and pipeline to their destinations.

FINAL STOP
Our All For Ohio Tour continued Sept. 26 with a trip up to “America’s Roller Coast” in Sandusky to visit member company Cedar Fair. The tour took place at Cedar Point, one of 11 amusement parks Cedar Fair owns across North America. Overall, Cedar Fair parks entertain more than 25 million visitors annually and showcase over 120 roller coasters.

The visit began with a shuttle tour through the property with Cedar Fair and Cedar Point staff. Highlights included recent expansion such as the new hybrid roller coaster Steel Vengeance — previously called Mean Streak — and the continued expansion of the signature Hotel Breakers.

The tour was followed with a presentation and roundtable discussion led by Jason McClure, vice president and general manager of Cedar Point. The roundtable included several points of state policy issues that facilitated conversation among Ohio Chamber staff and Cedar Fair staff, as well as Rep. Steven Arndt, of House District 89. Workforce development, a common issue among our members, was a top concern for the company, as were regulation, employment issues and infrastructure investments.

Cedar Point opened in 1870 and is the second-oldest operating amusement park in America. In 2022, it will celebrate its 150-year anniversary.

It was great to visit a few of our members this summer. We hope to continue our All For Ohio Tour next year. If you are interested in hosting elected officials and Ohio Chamber staff members at your company, please contact Kathy Eshelman at keshelman@ohiochamber.com.
You’ve got a business to run.

Health care is expensive.

We’ll help save you money.

In listening to our members, one of the common concerns we hear is the rising cost of health care. Because of this, we sought ways to bring down these costs. In partnership with BE Solutions, the Ohio Chamber of Commerce is now offering a wide breadth of health insurance options for small businesses, those with two to 99 employees. And with our new partnership with Delta Dental, we are offering standalone dental plan options exclusively for Ohio Chamber members.

On average, our members are seeing a 10 percent savings versus their previous year.

For more information on all of our insurance programs, contact Laz Picciano at lpicciano@ohiochamber.com, or call (614) 629-0926 or visit www.ohiochamber.com\insurance.
THE REVIVAL OF LAST-CHANCE AGREEMENTS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO TERMINATION

Recruiting and hiring employees can cost a company as much as $5,000 per candidate in the professional or manufacturing industries, according to the Society for Human Resource Management. In addition, an employer must also invest a considerable amount of time and money in on-the-job training and supervision. These kinds of investments—coupled with concerns about finding qualified employees—are causing some employers to look for alternatives to immediate termination when serious problems occur in the workplace.

One option is the last-chance agreement.

WHAT IS A LAST-CHANCE AGREEMENT?

A last-chance agreement (LCA) is an agreement between an employer and employee that allows an individual who has committed a serious violation against company policy to have one last chance to keep his or her job, instead of resorting to immediate termination. In exchange for continued employment, the employee agrees to follow a set of agreed-upon behaviors. Failure to make good on these promises will result in termination. LCAs are most common in union settings and often include the union as a party to the agreement. However, employers in non-union settings have also found them to be useful. A successful LCA generally has three components:

- To clearly set forth the employment issues at hand
- To detail specific steps that must be followed to correct the problem
- To define the consequences if the agreement is not followed

LCAs can be used in employment misconduct contexts ranging from chronic absenteeism and workplace harassment to the abuse of legal and illegal drugs.

WHEN IS IT APPROPRIATE TO USE AN LCA?

Imagine that an employee engages in prescription drug abuse and reports to work intoxicated, in violation of his employer’s anti-drug policy. The employee has a long tenure, and otherwise has a good work record. Furthermore, the employee claims that he misunderstood his dosage instructions. In other words, if the bad behavior continues, the employer must be prepared to enforce the agreement and terminate the employee. To do otherwise would send a message to all employees that such conduct can continue unabated and encourage litigation from any victims of the employee’s bad behavior. If the employee is not prepared to terminate the employee at the outset, then a safer course of action is to foregoing the LCA and prescribe a lesser discipline of suspension, reduction of pay, demotion or other appropriate measures.

LCAs can be useful tools for dealing with workplace misconduct when drafted and used correctly. With the renewed focus on the cost of hiring and retaining qualified employees, LCAs can be an additional tool that gives employers further flexibility in responding to misconduct in the workplace.

Steven Loewengart is an employment law attorney with more than 25 years of experience. He represents employers in a wide variety of labor and employment legal matters and serves a broad range of clients. Reach him at (614) 453-7606 or sloewengart@fisherphillips.com.

J.D. VANCE KICKS OFF 2017 POLICY CONFERENCE AT SALT FORK

Offers ideas to bring back American Dream to those who have been left out

THREE BIG IDEAS

The first possible solution is to talk about the loss of America’s intellectual property. Vance said that while the U.S. middle class is shrinking and suffering, the middle class in the rest of the world has been growing.

“We should be proud of the fact that there are fewer people in poverty all over the world, but $800 billion in intellectual property stolen from the United States last year, with most stolen by China,” Vance said.

This result when companies set up a business in another country and then are forced to transfer their knowledge and technology not to the consumers in those countries but to the government.

“That intellectual property came from your tax dollar, our university research and the hard work of American workers, and it is being stolen,” Vance said. “We shouldn’t be surprised that when this happens the American middle class starts to shrink and the American Dream starts to disappear. We have to talk more about this issue.”

Second, Vance sees too much emphasis on obtaining a college degree and not enough on other pathways to success.

“When I left the Marine Corps, I could flip burgers or go to college,” he said. “There’s a culture bias that some people don’t like the idea you can earn more as a plumber than with a college degree.”

Vance suggests reforming the education system so that the only options aren’t flipping burgers or earning a four-year degree.

Finally, Vance sees the opioid crisis not just as a social crisis but also an economic crisis.

“Employers would like to hire today, but they can’t find people who can pass a drug test,” Vance said. “That’s a significant problem, and it’s holding back earned success.”

This summer, Vance, his wife and their newborn son moved back to Ohio from California, and they reside in Columbus. He has started a nonprofit, Our Ohio Renewal, to help address the needs and issues he wrote about in his book.  
THE EEOC RELEASES WELLNESS PROGRAM GUIDELINES

Title I of the ADA. The final regulations clarify how the ADA’s voluntary standard applies to wellness programs. To further compound employer confusion, the final regulations state that a wellness program’s compliance with the ADA is considered voluntary as long as an employer neither requires participation nor penalizes employees who do not participate.

However, the EEOC at that time never established guidelines for when a penalty or an incentive would render the program involuntary – despite the fact that the Department of Labor simultaneously issued sweeping guidelines for incentivizing participation in wellness programs. To further compound employer concerns, the EEOC filed several suits alleging that employer wellness programs violated the “voluntary” requirement under the ADA.

In one lawsuit filed in 2011, an individual claimed that a penalty imposed by his employer’s wellness program for failure to take a health risk assessment and medical screenings violated the ADA. The court found that in the absence of clear EEOC guidance, the employer’s wellness program met a safe harbor available to bona fide benefit plans under the ADA. As a result, the wellness program design was allowed and did not trigger the ADA prohibition on disability-related inquiries or requiring medical examinations.

In another lawsuit in 2011, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) sought to halt enforcement of the EEOC’s regulations. In a recent case, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) sought to halt enforcement of the EEOC’s regulations. In the lawsuit, the AARP argued that the final wellness program regulations were inconsistent with the ADA and challenged the process the EEOC used in issuing the regulations. The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ordered the EEOC to reconsider its final wellness program rules under the ADA.

In response to the judge’s ruling in the AARP lawsuit, the EEOC stated that it will reconsider its final wellness program regulations and intends to issue new proposed regulations by August 2018.

NEXT STEPS

Employers sponsoring wellness programs do not need to take any new action at this time as a result of the AARP lawsuit. However, wellness program administrators is a challenging task, and employers should continually review their wellness programs to ensure they are structured correctly and comply with the applicable law.

Any changes an employer makes to its wellness program must be done carefully. Depending on the nature of the change, could change the applicable law and should be carefully reviewed. Looking forward, employers should be ready to implement any changes required by the new EEOC rules once those are issued.
WEINSTEIN WAKE-UP CALL
Harassment remains a significant workplace issue

Recently, there has been an explosion of claims that Hollywood heavy hitter Harvey Weinstein, co-founder of Weinstein Co., sexually assaulted and harassed women for decades.

While the salacious nature and sheer volume of the allegations surprised many, the fact that harassment still exists in America’s workplaces is unsurprising. In June 2016, participants in a Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace issued a report on the current state of harassment in the workplace, which was published on the EEOC’s website, www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/task_force/harassment/report.cfm.

The report concluded that “workplace harassment remains a persistent problem” (nearly one-third of charges filed with the EEOC in 2015 included an allegation of harassment), “harassment too often goes unreported” (about three of four individuals who experienced harassment never reported it) and “there is still a compelling business case for stopping and preventing harassment.” (In 2015, the EEOC recovered $164.6 million in harassment cases).

Given this, it is certainly time to revisit company efforts to address harassment in the workplace in a meaningful way. The following are key concepts to keep in mind:

• **Think of “harassment” in broad terms.** Just as harassment includes more than sexual harassment, keep in mind that disrespectful conduct and workplace incivility, while not per se illegal, may also be harassment. In fact, the EEOC recently launched training initiatives focused on addressing disrespectful and abusive behavior and empowering observers to appropriately intervene. Make sure your harassment policies cover not only illegal harassment but that they also establish your company’s expectations for a respectful workplace regardless of protected classification.

• **Expand the concept of “workplace.”** Policies and training should address not only conduct on company property, but other work-related settings such as business trips, work-related meetings and social events. Online or mobile device-related abusive behavior by employees is just as harmful (and more prevalent) than on-the-premises harassment and should likewise be prohibited.

• **Protect employees from harassment by others.** A well-crafted harassment policy will protect your employees against harassment by supervisors, customers, contractors, delivery personnel and temporary employees.

• **Provide multiple avenues for employee complaints** that will not remain unexamined unless they feel confident that the complaint is communicated to an individual or entity with authority to address the issue.

• **Maintain confidentiality to the fullest extent possible.** Assure those participating in an investigation that you will keep things as confidential as possible. However, do not tell the complaining party that you will not tell the alleged harasser who made the complaint. The alleged harasser should have the ability to understand the allegations to make an appropriate response.

• **Do not retaliate.** Harassing behavior goes unreported for fear of retaliation. Employers need to reassure employees reporting abusive behavior and anyone participating in the investigation that there will be no retaliation. This should be done verbally and in writing throughout the investigation. Likewise, alleged harassers should be instructed directly that the consequences for retaliating will be severe.

• **Take action.** After receiving a complaint, do something. Conduct an investigation and follow up on the investigation with the employee to assure the person that the company took the matter seriously and responded appropriately. Discipline the offender as appropriate and relative to the conduct that was revealed in the investigation. Sweeping things under the rug can come back to haunt your organization years later.

• **Supervisory training is not optional.** The impact (positive and negative) of an organization’s front-line supervisors cannot be overstated. Train them. Often, The “equal opportunity” is a defense of last resort. The argument that a supervisor is mean to every employee is not all that persuasive in front of a jury. In fact, juries will relish the opportunity to punish the “mean supervisor,” as well as the employer that continued to tolerate the bad behavior. This is where the concept of prohibiting abusive behavior (not just illegal harassment) comes into play.

Broad-based respectful workplace policies that incorporate equal employment opportunity and harassment issues, combined with effective employee training, may be the difference between a large jury verdict or settlement and an employer obtaining a dismissal of the claim. Ignoring the problem will only make it worse. Companies that take prompt action in response to harassment complaints go far toward staying out of court and the news.
MEET A BOARD MEMBER

Learning begins with discovery
Lois Rosenberry has been an active Ohio Chamber board member since 2001. She is the founder and CEO of Children’s Discovery Center (CDC) and serves as a member of the Ohio Small Business Council Committee and our Executive Committee.

What does your company do?
Children’s Discovery Center is a premier early care and education provider that encourages learning through exploration within a creative, nurturing environment. We have eight locations in Ohio and South Carolina serving 1,700 children.

How does your company impact the Ohio economy/benefit the Ohio business community?
Children’s Discovery Center employs 200 people in Ohio who serve as directors, teachers, assistants and support staff. Because of the nature of our services, we provide peace of mind to working parents, which enables them to competently fulfill their work responsibilities in the marketplace. We also utilize vendors from other industries, including banking, accounting, food, paper supplies, utilities, printing, maintenance and more. Therefore, we also impact the overall health of the supporting businesses.

What is your role at the company?
I am the founder of CDC and serve as the CEO.

How have you or your business benefited from your involvement with the Ohio Chamber?
I have gleaned best business practice ideas through my connections with other members, kept up to date with pending legislation that affects Ohio’s business climate and have become an issue advocate. Through my membership, I can make my voice heard at the Statehouse.

How long have you been on the board?
I have served on the Ohio Chamber Board of Directors for about 16 years.

What are some of the latest goals/objectives of your company?
Our company is birthing a catering company called Inspired Supplies, utilities, printing, maintenance and more. Therefore, we also impact the overall health of the supporting businesses.

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A childhood visit to Disneyland sparks the idea for a pet store empire
Ed Kunzelman was 10 years old, living in California, when Walt Disney opened his first theme park in Anaheim, California, in 1955. His first visit to the park left an indelible impression.

“I saw what Walt Disney had done to a carnage amusement park scene,” says Kunzelman. “It seemed a lot of pet stores weren’t that nice, like the little carnival scene. I wanted a store that was brighter, cleaner and filled with people that really liked animals and really liked people and could educate them about pets. So there was this theme, and that was why we called it Petland, like Disneyland.”

With a focus on customer service, animal care and store presentation, Petland defines leadership in the pet store retail industry. Petland Inc. began with one man, Kunzelman, who took his fish-keeping hobby to the next level by opening a single pet store on Oct. 21, 1967, in southern Ohio. The store featured 12 wet tanks and offered fish, small animals and birds. After months of customers asking about puppies, Kunzelman visited local breeders, and in spring 1968, began offering three to five puppies at a time, as they weren’t in high demand. For several years, Kunzelman continued to buy only from local breeders. However, once the first franchised Petland store opened in Portsmouth, Ohio, in 1972, and the business began to grow, it became necessary to find additional suppliers.

Fifty years later, Petland is an award-winning franchise operation based in Chillicothe, Ohio, providing jobs for approximately 500 people in this state alone.

COMMUNITY SERVICE
Petland’s work goes beyond simply selling a pet. The company is also committed to being a part of the community and providing public pet education. As a part of its Adopt-A-PetSM program, Petland provides homeless pets with a safe place while finding suitable families to take them in. As a part of its commitment to the community, it has also taken on several community service programs.

Safari Stan’s Children’s CharitiesSM collects money annually for St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital and has fulfilled over 250 pet-related wishes for the Make-A-Wish Foundation® of America.

Heartland Canines for Veterans provides disabled veterans with therapy, service and companion dogs and sponsors the full cost ($7,200) of one training dog per year.

Petland also provides service canine support by financially supporting or providing feeding programs for more than 125 therapy dogs and K9 units.

STRONG BUSINESS
Today, Petland remains a thriving business. This year the company achieved its highest ranking yet on Entrepreneur’s annual Franchise 500 list, coming in at No. 188. With 150 retail pet centers across the United States, Canada, Mexico, China, South Africa, Brazil and El Salvador, last year Petland announced plans to expand into the Middle East/North Africa region, as well.

Petland continues to put veterinary care at the forefront of its business model, making the decision to open a new clinic every year. “We feel that it is our responsibility to our customers who already own pets, we are dedicated to enhancing their knowledge and enjoyment of the human-animal bond.”

PHOTOS, top row, left to right: Director of the Ohio Small Business Council testifies in favor of House Bill 10.

The Ohio Chamber’s Energy & Environment Committee met in October to discuss pending energy and environmental issues.

Vice President of Membership Kathy Ehrman, Director of Energy and Environmental Policy, Zack Frymier and Director of External Relations, Stephanie Kramer, attended the Northeast Energy Management Conference in September.

PHOTOS, bottom row, left to right:

The Ohio Small Business Council held its quarterly meeting in October.

Our Ohio Chamber Taxation and Public Expenditures Committee met in October to discuss pending legislation.

Director of Energy and Environmental Policy, Zack Frymier testifies in favor of Senate Bill 188.
Kathy Eshelman is one of our newest team members at the Ohio Chamber of Commerce and started her job this year. Prior to joining our staff, she was a small business owner for 26 years. She brings that business experience to her position as vice president of membership. Eshelman, her husband, Jack, and daughter, Betsy, live in Dublin. She is a proud graduate of the University of Texas and holds a bachelor of arts degree in broadcast journalism.

Get to know Eshelman in the fourth installment of our Employee Spotlight.

Do you have any pets?
No. We did have a series of red betta fish. My daughter named them Ruby, Ruby 1, Ruby 2, Ruby 3, etc. Then we got a blue one and she still names it Ruby. They are all buried in our backyard.

Where did you grow up?
Pasadena, Texas, a suburb of Houston

Which three websites do you visit most?
SalesForce, Twitter and Facebook

What do you do when you are not working?
I teach WERQ, an aerobics class, be with my family, have fun with my grandchildren or spend time with my daughter at Pure International Pageants. (Last year we were both Miss Ohio for our age divisions.)

What is your favorite quote?
“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you imagined,” by Henry David Thoreau

Are you afraid of anything?
Gaining weight back after losing 100 pounds

If we asked your family and close friends to describe you in one word, what do you think they would say?
Gregarious

Do you have a secret family recipe? If so, what for?
Cornbread dressing, chocolate meringue pie, pecan pie and Texas sheet cake

What is your career highlight?
My appointment to the National Women’s Business Council, Advisors to the President, Congress and the SBA, and starting a business at age 25 growing it to a $1 million business

Tell us one thing that most people don’t know about you.
I marched in the University of Texas Longhorn Band and was honored to represent the state of Texas in the Inaugural Parade of President Ronald Reagan and Vice President George H.W. Bush. The band stayed in the Quasico Marine barracks and flew to D.C. in an orange Braniff airplane.

By Chris Ventura, Executive Director, Consumer Energy Alliance

Campaign for America’s Energy

WHY OHIO ENERGY MATTERS

Energy. It fuels and powers Ohio’s businesses, farms and families of all sizes, providing tremendous opportunities for growth across industry sectors and improving the lives of countless Ohioans. Yet this opportunity can only occur if our energy costs are affordable, we continue to advance environmental goals and the energy we use is reliable.

Do you remember how expensive energy bills were just a short time ago, with the price of a gallon of regular gas at $4.11 and natural gas reaching $12.71? Imagine those prices today, coupled with the ever-increasing electricity rates you are paying. Can your business or family afford to have those high prices return? For many, the answer is simply no.

The primary reason energy costs have decreased is an increase in American energy production, led in part by energy exploration in Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. To put this in perspective, if these three states were a separate country, it would be the third-largest producer of natural gas in the world. In fact, for the first time in history, the Energy Information Agency (EIA) is predicting that, this winter, the United States will not have to import any natural gas, which could not be accomplished without Ohio’s increased energy production.

In Ohio, we’re seeing an unprecedented investment in natural gas-fired power generation, with nearly a dozen power plants being built or in the planning stages. Businesses are realizing electricity prices that, in some cases, are 50 percent lower than in other exporting countries. At the same time, Ohio’s homeowners have seen their natural gas bills substantially decrease year over year. But make no mistake, the high energy prices that stifled economic growth, threatened jobs and pushed budgets to the brink can return if our elected officials make bad policy choices. And in today’s policy arena, with such differing points of view, anything can happen.

Once-bipartisan issues, such as achieving American energy independence from foreign countries and investing in new and modern energy infrastructure, have become increasingly partisan, with small, well-funded groups fighting to not just limit energy production and transmission in Ohio, but to stop it altogether. As with any piece of infrastructure, we must make common-sense choices about investing, building and upgrading energy in Ohio, from transmission infrastructure like high-voltage lines to pipelines to diversifying our energy with more solar and wind production. Yet, as noted by researchers, we are caught up in an unproductive, divisive and often misinformed debate about our energy strategy, which threatens not only Ohio, but our country’s economic and environmental goals.

Instead of providing thoughtful solutions and ideas, some individuals continue to make the illogical argument that we must choose between energy development and environmental protection. But why? We can, and must, have both.

Energy is not a partisan issue. The environment is not a partisan issue. It is time that people in communities across our state and this country come together with thoughtful solutions that can benefit not only our communities, but communities everywhere. We cannot become complacent when it comes to ensuring affordable, reliable and safe delivery of our American energy resources.

It is time to change the discussion by highlighting the importance of the energy that businesses, farms and families all need. It is time to raise public awareness and ensure our elected officials realize the consequences that bad policy decisions could have on Ohio’s job creators and families.

For too long, well-funded anti-development groups have attacked energy development without understanding the consequences to families and businesses or providing actual solutions to meet our basic everyday needs. That is why Consumer Energy Alliance (CEA) is launching Campaign for America’s Energy, focused on fostering a more thoughtful public discussion on the implications that energy policy has on businesses and families across our state. It is time we look at the facts in order to end this unproductive and often misinformed or intentionally misleading discussion on energy.

The fact is that Ohio deserves a reliable, cost-effective and clean energy future. Businesses and families are counting on it to ensure our elected officials prioritize energy policy issues.

Ohio is one of the leading energy-producing states.

Increased energy production has decreased costs.

Energy development and environmental protection are equally important.

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Quick Glance

Ohio is one of the leading energy-producing states.

Increased energy production has decreased costs.

Energy development and environmental protection are equally important.

Standards enacted not just in America, but in the world.

Responsibly developing Ohio’s energy resources and protecting the environment are not a zero-sum game. We can, and must, do both to preserve our state and all it has to offer our children.

We invite you to join us in leading a national dialogue on why Ohio’s energy matters to our businesses, our communities and our families.

Chris Ventura is executive director for Consumer Energy Alliance - Midwest. Prior to joining CEA, Ventura served as senior project manager for the Ohio House of Representatives under Speaker William Batchelder. CEA is the leading U.S. consumer advocate in support of affordable, reliable energy for working families, seniors and businesses across the country.

To learn more, visit www.ConsumerEnergyAlliance.org.
New initiatives coming for 2018

As we put the final touches on 2017, I want to thank those who have helped us continue our mission. As the state’s leading business advocate and resource, the Ohio Chamber of Commerce aggressively champions free enterprise, economic competitiveness and growth for the benefit of all Ohioans.

First, I want to thank our leaders this year, Tom Zains, who served as chairman from April 2015 to May 2017, and Larry Kidd, who took the helm at this year’s Annual Meeting. Both of these chairmen have helped keep the Ohio Chamber on focus so that we can successfully carry out our mission. They have given enormous hours of time and talent in helping the organization.

Second, I’d like to thank all of our board members. These business leaders take time away from their businesses to attend our board meetings and events. Their belief in our mission helps us to make the best decisions for Ohio’s business community.

Third, I’d like to thank the over 850 volunteer committee members. By participating in our committee work, they are helping to move our mission forward. Their effort was reviewing legislation that impacts Ohio businesses and providing input on what would make Ohio’s business climate better helps us achieve our goals.

Finally, I’d like to thank all of you — our members. It is your belief in our mission that keeps us going, day after day. Without our members, there wouldn’t be an Ohio Chamber of Commerce. When advocating at the Statehouse, our No. 1 priority is to do what is best for our members.

2017 marks the 134th year of existence for the Ohio Chamber of Commerce. This year, we hosted 27 HR Academy webinars business symposiums. Our Annual Meeting featured former college football coach Lou Holtz, and our 2017 Policy Conference at Salt Fork featured best-selling author J.D. Vance. We introduced a new health and dental insurance program for our members, and we are getting ready to launch a cyber insurance program.

We also scored many legislative victories. When the budget bill was introduced, it included a tax reform package composed of increases in the sales, oil and gas severance, tobacco products, and beer and wine taxes, along with a plan to expand the sales tax to several services not currently subject to it. These tax changes would have resulted in an estimated $1.2 billion of new taxes on Ohio employers.

Other pro-business provisions we supported during the budget process included common-sense reforms to Ohio’s municipal income tax system, a new process for how the Ohio EPA handles discharge permitting appeals and several new workforce development initiatives. We continue to advocate for changes to Ohio’s broke and broken unemployment compensation system.

With 2018 fast approaching, we are looking forward to celebrating our 125th anniversary. We have several new initiatives in the works, including an employer tool kit that will help deal with the opiate/opioid crisis, and a few other exciting things that you’ll just have to wait to hear about. As we finish up 124 years advocating on behalf of Ohio’s businesses, I just want to say thank you to everyone who contributed to our success, and I look forward to working with you next year.

Andrew S. Dizard