

Gov. Ridge cuts ribbon to Guard expansion project

New project to create 150 jobs downtown

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Gov. Tom Ridge was in downtown Wilkes-Barre Monday afternoon to celebrate an expansion project of Guard Insurance Group which represents a historic milestone of the Keystone Opportunity Zone Program, created under his administration.

The governor joined Guard co-owners Judd and Susan Shoval in a ceremonial ribbon-cutting of the new Guard Security Bank, located in the former M&T bank building on East Market Street, which is expected to create 150 new jobs for area residents in a designated KOZ of the city.

Donning a Guard sweatshirt, the governor spoke highly of the new addition to downtown Wilkes-Barre which he believes is a shining example of the economic development goals of his administration.

"It's a very unique celebration, because the Guard is participating in one of the best economic development initiatives that we've done in Pennsylvania and that is they are not only staying here in Wilkes-Barre, but they're growing," Gov. Ridge explained. "We're trying to create tax-free havens for people to come and invest and this is exactly what Guard has done. This is a company that's on the move."

The announcement puts the KOZ initiative over the 3,000 mark in state job creation since its inception in February, Ridge stressed. The 12 "tax-free" zones, which cover more than 26,000 acres are also credited for the retention of 2,196 jobs, he added.

The governor noted in 1983, the company had about 15 employees and has grown to more than 200 employees with expectations to add more than 150 over the next two to three years. The state will also equip Guard with about \$100,000 in job-training funds, Ridge added.

"Today is a significant day for the expanded Guard family," Judd Shoval remarked. "It is



Taking part in the ribbon-cutting, from left, are Mayor Tom McGroarty, Judd Shoval, Gov. Tom Ridge and Susan Shoval

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another milestone in our quest to become employer of choice and a world-class organization.

"Today is also a significant day for downtown Wilkes-Barre. The downtown is struggling to rebuild itself and to revitalize itself, and I believe if we all work together, we can accomplish great things," he continued.

Shoval commended the governor for his role in critical legislative reform of workers compensation which has resulted in insurance companies being better able to compete with other states, but without reducing benefit levels for injured workers.

"Today, insurance consumers enjoy reduced workers compensation costs because of the impact of acts 44 and 57, while insurance companies are better able to contain expenses and achieve growth," Shoval said.

"By the end of this year, the cost reduction will be in the vicin-

ity of \$1.7 billion. That money goes back into the community, back into businesses, back to employees," the governor stated.

Gov. Ridge spoke positively about the city's efforts and Mayor Tom McGroarty. "I've been in this public service business now for about 18 years and I've met a lot of fine, spirited and energetic public servants, but your Mayor (McGroarty) is absolutely relentless," Ridge said. "He believes in you, he believes in this city, and I'm glad he's here."

Ridge commended employees of Guard for their hard work and dedication in promoting and growing the company. "Few people are successful unless a lot of other people want them to be.

"Your success is because of your extraordinary relationship you have," he said, citing Guard met its United Way goal, contributes 20-30 pounds of food for a Christmas food drive, and great

work environment.

Mayor Tom McGroarty noted Guard's project is evidence the city is beginning to reap benefits from the program.

"I'm happy to be the mayor, I'm happy to be re-elected, and happy to have an opportunity to carry out Ridge's redevelopment assistance program and the city is going to be a great part of that," Mayor McGroarty remarked. "We're going to do well."

McGroarty noted he met with the governor and members of his Action Team for three hours Monday morning to discuss possible future development projects. "He (Gov. Ridge) gave me the straight up today about some other things for the downtown, the mayor hinted, but refused to elaborate, noting an official announcement is expected to be forthcoming. "It was a very good meeting. I think very shortly

you'll see something...and when the governor announces, I'll be smiling," McGroarty said.

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