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Drilling deep for answers about offshore energy

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Drilling off Virginia's shores for oil and gas is a viable and potentially game-changing boon for the economy of Hampton Roads, industry advocates and visitors from the Gulf Coast told a ballroom filled with supporters and opponents of the idea.

This past spring, visitors from Hampton Roads traveled to Louisiana to learn about how exploring and developing offshore energy in Virginia might improve the economy. The Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce organized the trip. At the Sept. 21 forum at The Founders Inn in Virginia Beach, some of the featured presenters from the chamber's spring visit came to this area to speak firsthand about the links between the offshore energy industry and their communities.

"Everyone from the governor and our senators and our congressman and our state delegation tells us we need to diversify our economy," Bryan Stephens, president and CEO of the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, said at the opening of the forum.

Although there are several possible avenues to do that, such as the development of the cybersecurity and biomedical industries, none holds the same potential as offshore energy, Stephens said.

In the discussion about offshore energy, unfortunately, the two sides don't seem to be listening to each other, said Charlotte Randolph, president of Lafourche Parish, La. Port Fourchon is located in the parish. It is Louisiana's southernmost port, located on the Gulf of Mexico.

Randolph said her community "evolved into oil and gas" and that the industry really matured after World War II. Fishing vessels became oil support vessels, and that, she explained, is how the foundation of innovation in the industry was built and how many people became connected with the industry. The industry, in turn, Randolph said, has fueled the community's economic growth.

U.S. Rep. Scott Rigell, R-Virginia Beach, has made several visits to the Gulf Coast to learn about the issue. He also joined the chamber group earlier this year and spoke at this month's forum in Virginia Beach.

Rigell said he is convinced that offshore energy resources can be leveraged safely but added that data, facts and conversations, such as the chamber's event, are the way to advance advocacy for energy development interests.

In addition to Randolph and Rigell, other featured speakers at the event included Tucker Dorsey, commissioner of Baldwin County, Ala.; Jeff Vorberger, vice president of policy and government affairs at the National Ocean Industries Association; Milton Saidu, a professor in the department of petroleum engineering technology and safety management at Nicholls State University; and Eric Smith, associate director of the Tulane University Energy Institute.

Vorberger said the energy reality is that about 60 percent of our energy needs are met by oil and gas and about 10 to 12 percent are met by renewable energy resources. That segmentation is unlikely to change significantly in the coming decades, he said.

"Based upon that reality, coupled with the understanding of the importance of oil and gas in our lives, we have to look for new ways and new areas of responsibility to locate it and also produce it," Vorberger said.

However, opponents say the potential economic benefit could be a boondoggle with limited economic return and lots of environmental risks. They too used data to make their point.

"You shouldn't think of Port Fourchon as a coastal community. Rather it is one massive shipyard and hardly one that Hampton Roads



would want to emulate," said Jonathan Henderson with the Gulf Coastal Restoration Network in New Orleans.

"Anyone attempting to tout Louisiana's economy should realize the fact that Louisiana ranks last or near last in poverty, education, pollution and health issues," Henderson said in a one-page statement issued by Eileen Levandoski, assistant director of the Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club.

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