Governor's plan to reduce business red tape met with skepticism

by Paul E. Kostyu

COLUMBUS, Ohio - During the campaign for Ohio governor, Democrat Ted Strickland didn't say a lot about regulatory reform, but his opponent Republican J. Kenneth Blackwell did.

At a debate in Cincinnati, Blackwell said he would "clean up the regulatory environment that's going crazy and provide regulatory predictability." It was a promise Blackwell repeated throughout his unsuccessful campaign.

On Tuesday, Gov. Strickland established Advantage Ohio, a regulatory reform initiative. "We must make sure that business regulation is clear, predictable and stable to allow businesses to plan and invest in Ohio," Strickland said.

"I think it's funny when a Democrat starts talking like a Republican or the Chamber of Commerce," said a skeptical Catherine Turcer of Ohio Citizen Action, a citizen advocacy group.

But Linda Woggon of the Ohio Chamber of Commerce said regulatory reform was a Strickland priority during the campaign as part of his Turn Around Ohio plan.

"We think it's a very good idea for small businesses," she said, "because they don't have the advantage of having in-house experts on regulatory requirements. It's time-consuming and costly. It's important that this be a priority."

While the state requires five-year reviews of rules, Woggon said the results have "tended to be increases instead of decreases" in regulations. She said Strickland's reform effort is an opportunity to incorporate technology to move information from business to various agencies without requiring separate filings.

"It makes sense to see how regulations impact business," Turcer said. "If you do that, then you should also look for the loopholes (in the regulations) that are not protecting consumers. We need a balance."

"Blackwell talked about this in the campaign," said David Hansen, president of the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions. "Strickland didn't respond."

The Buckeye Institute, a conservative research group, recently hired Blackwell to evaluate public policy issues. Hansen said Blackwell is following a self-imposed, 100-day no-comment period about Strickland's policies.

Hansen said there are a number of workplace regulations and right-to-work issues that should be addressed by the review, which will be led by Columbus attorney Scott North.

"It's the right thing to be doing," Hansen said. "We have been losing jobs and economic opportunities."

"This is a fine howdy-do for the people of a state burdened with some of the worse exposure in the nation to dangerous toxic pollution," said Jack Shaner of the Ohio Environmental Council. "It's hard to see how the target is anything other than the Ohio EPA."

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency may be the state's leading regulatory agency in terms of rules that affect nearly every business, industry and member of the public.

"This could be a disadvantage for Ohio families," Shaner said.

Keith Dailey, Strickland's spokesman, said the EPA is not a target of the reform effort. "The focus is on selective regulations and practices that have significant links to the business community."

He said North will meet with cabinet members to "pinpoint unnecessary and redundant regulations." He said consumer groups and public watchdog groups will be consulted during the process.

Governor's plan to reduce business red tape met with skepticism by Paul E. Kostyu