

## Driverless Cars, \$130 million Aquariums and 28,000 Warehouse Workers

The Lehigh Valley economy is growing fast, automated cars are coming sooner than you might think, and a \$130 million aquarium that once seemed like a dream is now “doable.”

Those were among the subjects tackled during the most recent episode of Business Matters on WFMZ-TV, Channel 69. The 30-minute show featured a panel of experts consisting of Lehigh Valley Planning Commission Executive Director Becky Bradley, Discover Lehigh Valley President Michael Stershic, Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corp. President Don Cunningham and Air Products Community Relations and Philanthropy Manager Laurie Gostley Hackett.

The episode aired Monday, Jan. 29, but you can find it at: [wfmz.com/businessmatters](http://wfmz.com/businessmatters).

In a discussion led by ever-energetic host Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce President Tony Iannelli, the show focused on regional efforts and how they’ll carry the Valley into a future that’s coming fast.

It comes as the Valley’s population is growing by about 1 percent per year, Bradley said, while the economy grows even faster.

“We’ve had a good run in the Valley,” Iannelli said to Bradley. “But what concerns you? What worries you from a future planning standpoint?”

“Well, I think we’re on the verge of a lot of technological change - vehicle automation, for example. By 2025, there are expected to be several fully automated types of vehicles on the roads,” Bradley said. “I wouldn’t say we’re concerned about it, but we need to start planning for that now and figuring out what that’s going to mean, and figuring out how we want to invest in our transportation infrastructure. And what are the impacts to the community? I think it provides us with a lot of opportunity in the future.”

That transition is happening while the Valley workforce is at what some consider full employment, with an unemployment rate of just 5%. But is it the right kind of employment? Cunningham said yes, and no. Yes, there are now 28,000 warehouse workers making \$15 to \$18 per hour, but that’s not a bad wage for unskilled work that doesn’t require a college degree. That market has effectively set the Lehigh Valley minimum wage at \$15 an hour, he said. Though he’d like to begin developing a healthier office market, the region’s economy is actually humming along rather well, he said. Its gross domestic product output has improved from a national rank of 73 last year to 65 this year.

“We tend to think our economy is all about fulfillment or other sectors, but we have 32,000 people working in manufacturing and 680 manufacturers across both counties and what we see right now in the pipeline is many more looking to get in here.” Cunningham said.

The panelists covered several subjects ranging from economy to tourism to Air Products’ commitment to keeping their headquarters in the Lehigh Valley.