

## Trade and the Africa/Middle East Region: What Lies Ahead

On October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the Africa and Middle East committee kicked off its program year with the trade forum "Perspectives on trade issues in the Africa/Middle East region and looking ahead in 2007." The trade forum welcomed Ms. Florizelle Liser, Assistant United States Trade Representative for Africa, and Mr. Paul Burkhead, Director, Europe and Middle Eastern Trade Affairs, Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR). The event was hosted at the offices of Baxter Healthcare Corporation in downtown Washington, DC.

A number of officials from the African and Middle East diplomatic corps, including ambassadors and embassy representatives, as well as business and trade professionals attended the trade forum.

The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) has proven quite beneficial to business owners in a number of African countries, according to Ms. Liser.

At the same time, trade constraints within the African region continue to make it difficult for these countries to take full advantage of the benefits offered under AGOA. The lack of inter-continental trade and cooperation have acted as major stumbling blocks. Ms. Liser also discussed a lack of understanding on the part of African countries of the potential of both inter-continental trading and partnerships as well as international trade to boost their economies.



From Left to right: Sarah Creviston - VP, Baxter Government Affairs, Florizelle Liser, Assistant United States Trade Representative for Africa, and Paul Burkhead, Director, Europe and Middle Eastern Trade Affairs, USTR

These challenges, however, do not overshadow the optimism that Ms. Liser feels about Africa's trading potential. She is confident that African businesses can trade successfully with proper knowledge, training, and technical assistance.



Mr. Burkhead stressed the same idea with regard to the Middle East and suggested that knowledge is lacking about free trade agreements (FTA's) and how they work. Mr. Burkhead maintained that it is important for businesses to understand that FTA's provided benefits in many ways, and that they are as beneficial to the Middle Eastern countries in entering the U.S. market as they are to American companies entering the Middle East.

As the presentations concluded with a round of Q&A, attendees enjoyed delicious hors d'oeuvres, accompanied by South African wines and mingled with the distinguished guest, new and old friends and colleagues.