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What's Next, Greenbrier County?

By Ashley Adkins

As mining and manufacturing jobs that have served as the backbone of West Virginia's economy for more than a century decline at an alarming rate, West Virginians are asking a critical question: "What's next, West Virginia?"

That question has become the launching pad for a growing number of cities across the Mountain State to begin a long overdue conversation on economic diversity.

On Thursday, October 16, Greenbrier Countians will have an opportunity to join that conversation at a planning meeting at the Greenbrier County Public Library from 7-9 PM.

Following the lead of cities like Buckhannon, Martinsburg, Beckley and Charleston, that all held meetings centered around this question in August and September, Greenbrier County resident Richard Bantel organized Thursday's meeting to draw out residents who are asking what's next for Greenbrier County.

"Greenbrier County is like no other county in West Virginia," said Bantel, noting that the solutions which work in other areas of the state may not be what is needed for this county, which is largely distinct in its blend of tourism, preserved, rural land and historic sites.

Bantel hopes that representatives of every industry, including mining and manufacturing, will come out to this week's meeting. The goal of economic diversity is not to replace existing industries, but to ensure that an economy's health and the vitality of its residents are not dependent on a single industry and, therefore, vulnerable to dramatic boom and bust cycles.

West Virginia ranked fourth in the nation for worst quality of life in a recent, nine-factor well-being study conducted by the Organization

for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The greatest factors contributing to the state's low score were poor civic engagement, poor health, unemployment, low income and limited access to services.

The OECD ranked West Virginia 46 out of 51 in the jobs category, with the lowest employment rate (60.5 percent) of any state. West Virginia's household disposable income (per capita) was listed at \$25,199, the eighth lowest in the nation.

Eighty-four and a half percent of the state's labor force has obtained at least a secondary education, according to the OECD report, yet many graduates remain under or unemployed.

Residents of Greenbrier County aren't faring much better, according to Bantel, who said he was stirred to organize the What's Next, Greenbrier County? meeting after speaking with a young mother working for a fast food chain in Lewisburg.

"When I asked her how long she'd been working there, tears came to her eyes," Bantel said. "She said she'd been working there for a couple of years, but she wasn't there because she wanted to be - she had a college education and was raising two kids on little more than minimum wage because she couldn't find anything else."

On the western end of the county, 31 employees lost their jobs when Magic Mart, one of the town's largest retail stores, suddenly shut its doors in September.

"Our people need jobs, and there's no place for them to go," said Rainelle Mayor Andrea Pendleton, who added that she was disappointed she would not be able to attend Thursday's meeting herself due to a prior engagement.

Despite these grim figures, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, which sponsors and facilitates

What's Next? conversations around the state, is asking residents to step away from blame-shifting and begin to take ownership of our own economic success and well-being.

"How can West Virginians play an active role in writing a future that ensures that "the economy" is not something that happens to us - but something we can take an active role in creating?" asks the discussion guide on the What's Next, West Virginia? website.

Anne Brown, vice president of the Lewisburg Farmers Market, believes one of the answers to that question rests in the land and the farmers who till it. Citing a report from West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick, Brown said West Virginia spends more than \$7 billion on food, and 95 percent of that food comes from out of state.

"The money we're earning here doesn't go back into our economy, it goes to other states and other countries," said Brown. "If we could claim even a seventh of what's going into other states, it would be an extra billion dollars circulating in West Virginia."

Brown doesn't think the shift would be difficult to achieve if more people would recognize the important role small farms can play in local economies.

"There's no reason for West Virginia to import garlic from China or potatoes from Idaho," said Brown. "Our beef is the best beef in the country because we have small farms, but our beef is being exported to China while Kroger sells us beef from Uruguay."

Improved access to and education on local, organic food might also be able to change the dismal health outlook for West Virginia residents. West Virginia ranked as the third worst state in the health category

in the OECD's study, with a life expectancy of 75.4 years and an age adjusted mortality rate of 10.5 deaths per 1,000 people.

Brown, who said she learned of the startling statistics related to food production in West Virginia at a small meeting nearly five years ago, believes one of the greatest obstacles to reversing the economy's downward course is a lack of communication, both within and between industries. Bantel and Brown both hope this Thursday's meeting will be the first step toward bringing these industries together in a productive conversation, but the decision ultimately rests with the people of Greenbrier County.

West Virginia rated as the worst state in the country for civic engagement in the OECD's report, with the lowest voter turnout rate of any state at 47.8 percent. Bantel speculated that this startling statistic might be due to discouragement or despair, but he hoped it wasn't apathy.

"My main focus is to gauge the interest in Greenbrier County, to see if we can get people to come together to make some improvement to the economic situation here," Bantel said. "If not, I'll go back to the farm and keep farming. I'm retired, but I am concerned about the poor kids who don't have an opportunity to get a decent job, and I hope others are as well."

Thursday's meeting will take place at the Greenbrier County Public Library from 7-9 PM. Questions can be directed to Bantel at his email, wvforum@yahoo.com.

For more information on What's Next, West Virginia? meetings and resources, visit their website www.whatsnextwv.org. For complete details on the OECD report, visit the interactive website www.oecdregionalwellbeing.org.