

Economic Future Must Address Decline of Coal

by KATIE DUNN, Staff Writer

If a series of planning meetings held this week is any indication, current economic challenges will play a predominant role in determining how the county's landscape will look two decades from now.

Focus group meetings this week kicked off a year-long process to update the county's comprehensive plan. Planning Works officials — the consulting firm is assisting the county in its plan update — met with various advisory committees on Tuesday and Wednesday and began pinpointing issues the county must address.

Declining coal production was among the first concerns cited during an economic development committee meeting that brought 14 county business leaders and officials to the table Tuesday. County Economic Development Director Carl Snodgrass said in talking with industry officials, the county's economy is still about 46 percent dependent on coal. He doesn't believe the industry will disappear, but said the county also has an ongoing goal to diversify its economic base. This effort has seen success, but there are still issues, including a perception by some prospective companies that the county is too isolated, he said.

Employers that have chosen Wise County also noted hurdles in recruiting new employees. Bill Rose, account director at Sykes, said the company has been in the county for 14 years and employs 300 people. Employees aren't required to have a college degree, which he said is beneficial since many local residents lack higher education. Still, failed drug tests disqualify many candidates and overall recruitment has declined. Challenges also exist in convincing clients that Wise County boasts a better work force and location compared to other places that might have more services and attractions.

Dan Minahan, Crutchfield Corp.'s director of operations, echoed Rose's concerns about recruiting qualified employees. The pool of qualified job candidates has declined since the company moved to the area in the late 1990s. At one time, Crutchfield employed more local college graduates, but Minahan thinks many of these individuals now leave the area after graduation.

Anthony Scime, OptaFuel's chief executive officer, moved to the area two years ago when his research and development company opened. The company employs highly educated individuals who Scime said also often have highly educated spouses who can't find local jobs. This hurts recruitment efforts, he explained. Other recruitment challenges include a lack of housing opportunities, quality rental housing, and restaurants.

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

Participants also mentioned the need to encourage the county's younger generations to stay here.

First Bank and Trust's Cory Dotson said he's concerned that the town of Wise hasn't fully embraced the college. The county's population is also aging, and Dotson said there aren't enough young people living here or participating in meetings or on boards that help make decisions for the county. "Maybe we're not listening to them (either)," he suggested.

Planning Works' Mike Chandler said the firm plans to interview high school seniors and ask whether they want to stay in the county and what factors might prevent them from doing so. These conversations are critical, he said, since the county's youth represent its future. At a public forum later that evening, participants also suggested individuals in their 20s be included in these discussions.

Wise native Jimmy Adkins, also a regional planner with Lenowisco, wants to ensure the county can be a place where his four-year-old and seven-year-old can pursue careers. He divided his generation into four general categories: natives who stay in the county and are on drugs, receive disability payments, or are unemployed; individuals who leave the county for other opportunities; natives who stay for love, pride, family, and change; and non-natives who come for school or job opportunities and fall in love with the county. All four of these areas are impacted by infrastructure, he said, whether it's transportation, training, culture, or healthcare. All these aspects impact everyone's quality of life.

FORWARD LOOKING

County Administrator Shannon Scott said a focal point of the plan must be the coal industry's decline as a major economic engine and how the county can rebound. People must have the courage to speak the truth about these issues without worrying about the potential backlash or ramifications of doing so.

Spencer Quesenberry, Quesenberry's Inc. president, and Ricky Mullins, a local contractor, also said if the county and its towns hope to grow and prosper, they must stop competing and start collaborating.

Despite the many issues the county must address, Leton Harding, Powell Valley National Bank chief executive officer, urged those gathered to also focus on its potential. Envision the University of Virginia's College at Wise boasting an enrollment of 7,000 full-time students two decades from now. Imagine Big Stone Gap as a hub for literary entertainment and development, with writers flocking to the town to build upon the literary works of John Fox Jr. and Adriana Trigiani. St. Paul will continue to grow its ecotourism potential, and Norton will boast a thriving downtown with eateries and retail shops lining the streets. The county's other three communities — Pound,

Appalachia, and Coeburn — could provide places for people who can work from anywhere, like telemedicine, to do so from a mountain abode.

As far as concerns about the county's declining youth population, Harding said its two colleges bring in new students each year who have no preconceptions about the area. "I encourage you that you are literally going to have to start with a clean slate, you're going to have to forget this battle happened and that battle happened," he said. "And I can tell you that the power of the Internet, the power of nature, and the power of intellect has the potential to make Wise County an unlimited success."

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