

## **EDITORIAL**

# **Comprehensive Planning Process Is Perfect Time To Redefine Wise County**

by JEFF LESTER, News Editor

Next Tuesday, July 15, two municipal planning consultants will ask Wise Countians to envision the county they want to see in 10 years and in 20 years.

Mike Chandler and Bruce Peshoff of Planning Works will ask citizens to share thoughts about the county's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats and visions.

Here's hoping that the room is full and folks are clamoring to speak their minds. Here's hoping the conversation cuts through warmth and fuzziness to reach some hard truths.

And may I suggest starting with a question that many folks don't want to face but is facing us already:

What will Wise County be like after coal?

We all know that coal mining has been the defining element of the county's population growth, development, investment, politics and political clout for more than 125 years. Without it, we would not have railroads, intersecting four-lane highways, two colleges, a city and six still-surviving towns, and so much more.

We all know as well that coal mining employs just a few thousand people in Virginia in the year 2014, compared to tens of thousands in the time of our grandparents. Local governments have used coal severance taxes to keep real estate tax rates low for decades, but the severance tax money is shrinking away.

Coal mining isn't likely to vanish from Wise County in the next 20 years. There will still be markets for steam and steel-making coal, mostly in the growing superpowers of Asia.

And there's the Virginia City Hybrid Energy Center, which is supposed to burn coal and reclaimed gob for decades while paying significant property taxes to the county. That is, if it doesn't get regulated out of existence long before its planned lifespan runs out. Nevertheless, one power plant does not a coal industry make.

Who truly believes the Virginia coal industry will boom again while governments around the globe make plans for a future that — agree or disagree — includes far less expulsion of carbon into the atmosphere? Those rising Asian powers still need coal-fired electricity, but they are gradually becoming more aggressive than us at pursuing alternatives.

It's happening exactly at the same time that high-tech gas drilling technology developed in the Southwest and in Southwest Virginia opens up new sources of lower-carbon, lower-cost natural gas — not here, but in the Marcellus shale of northwestern Virginia, northern West Virginia and western Pennsylvania.

We can hope that our friends and neighbors who depend on coal for their livelihood won't go through any more hardship any time soon. We can hope that those many more of us whose businesses and jobs depend on having that cash circulating through the local economy don't suffer any more as well.

But as a community, we need to plan as if the coal economy could vanish tomorrow.

Clearly, Wise County needs more industry that is suitable to workers whose mining skills can translate to manufacturing, servicing machinery and systems, transportation and other high-skill, good-wage work. If, for example, we assume that growth in energy efficiency and alternative energy is inevitable, the folks who produce fossil energy certainly ought to have a crack at producing its replacements.

Wise County has plenty of other assets that ought to grow or keep growing.

The crossroads and corridors of two four-lane highways are natural focal points for activity. It's become easier than ever for visitors to come here.

Tourism assets that existed in 1998, the time of the last comprehensive plan update, have been joined by exciting additions and new marketing initiatives: Spearhead Trails ATV courses, The Crooked Road music trail, increased focus on the Clinch River, Norton's mountain bike trail and more. Outfitter businesses have sprung up to cater to visitors. Property owners are renovating buildings to provide lodging. We have more conventional hotel/motel lodging than ever.

And don't forget: When the "Big Stone Gap" movie hits theaters, a whole new wave of local tourism will be set in motion.

There's natural beauty everywhere in Wise County. Meanwhile, a lot of Appalachian natives who migrated to Detroit for auto plant jobs now live in a city that's in decay. Should we not look hard at what will lure more of them to come home to the mountains? Wise County can do that.

We have history galore. Even if the coal industry continues to fade, its legacy fascinates people who have never experienced it as well as those who grew up in it and migrated elsewhere. Wise County can capitalize on that interest.

We have two fine institutions of higher education here that have always been engines for growth. Never were they needed more than now, I say. Mountain Empire Community College and UVA-Wise attract innovation, investment and broader, better quality of life for us all. Communities should embrace those opportunities to their utmost.

We have two fine public school systems with new or renovated high schools and a great vocational-technical program.

The health care industry is in turmoil, yet Wise County and Norton continue to have three hospitals, a regional cancer center and numerous medical practices. An aging population suggests that demand for health services will grow. We can work to ensure that they continue to be provided here.

We've reached the point where it's hard to drive for more than 10 minutes without getting at least a two-bar wireless signal. Wise County is digital and mobile.

No Pollyanna optimism here; I know that the county has plenty of problems — and for my money, small-town rivalry, partisanship and infighting are high on the list.

But I've traveled enough to know that all the assets I've listed above would be the envy of many, many places across Virginia and the nation. Despite all the stubborn problems and growing challenges ahead, we have quite a lot here that we can cultivate for the future.

It's too fine a place for giving up or for complacency — and giving up is not our style in Southwest Virginia anyway.

As for complacency, that's an individual choice. PLEASE: Choose to come out on July 15 and speak your piece! u

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