

Local Columns

/ News / Opinion / Local Columns /

- Editorials
- Letters to the Editor
- Journal Junction
- **Local Columns**
- Syndicated Columnists
- Government Officials
- Reader forums
- Blogs
- SUBMIT Letters to the Editor
- SUBMIT to Journal Junction

[Loving and hating the EPA in...>](#)

West Virginia needs new paradigm

March 24, 2012

By Sean O'leary - Saturday columnist (seanoleary@citlink.net) , journal-news.net

[Save](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [Post a comment](#) | [SHARE](#)

It's over. We lost. Royal Dutch Shell announced that its nearly mythical ethylene cracker plant is going to Pennsylvania.

Shattered are our hopes for 12,000 new jobs. Shattered also should be the myth that cutting and abating taxes is an effective strategy for attracting businesses and revitalizing West Virginia's economy.

But, that's not all. The loss of the cracker should also cause us to reassess not just the ways in which we try to accomplish economic prosperity, but whether it's even possible for West Virginia to do so and, if it's not, ask what other more attainable and perhaps better goals we should pursue.

If that sounds defeatist, look at the facts. West Virginia has never - not from the day it was created - been prosperous. Due to a decades-long tradition of emigration by the young and educated, we have the poorest, oldest, least educated, unhealthiest, most disabled population in America. We lack any major commercial or population centers and, with the exceptions of the Eastern and Northern Panhandles, we have no proximity to any. We have only one major education center, which not coincidentally is one of our two tiny islands of prosperity, the Eastern Panhandle's Washington, D.C., exurbs being the other.

For the most part, we are a cultural desert, a fact I would not have thought quantifiable until stumbling across a National Endowment of The Arts analysis of census data, which showed that West Virginia has the fewest working artists per capita of any state. Finally, much of what would otherwise be valuable virgin forestland is despoiled by coal mining, an industry that discourages the development of other industries and produces economic misery everywhere it is present.

That's a great deal to overcome when trying to attract new residents, businesses, and investment - also things in which we trail the nation. None the less, we've recently invested a great deal of hope in natural gas, both its extraction and in the industries it can spin off, which brings us back to the cracker plant.

If discounting the state could be a winning strategy for West Virginia, we would have won this one. We offered Shell \$300 million in tax incentives which would have created what Ted Boettner of the West Virginia Center for Budget and Policy called "a virtual tax-free environment." It's as though Gov. Tomblin

Martinsburg, WV

61.0° [Extend](#)
[Find An](#)
Data provided by The Weather

News, Blogs & Events

I am looking for:

- in:
- News, Blogs & Events
 - Web
 - EZ

hauled the state to the end of the driveway like an old commode, spray-painted on it the word "free" in day-glow letters, then watched Shell drive on by. Pennsylvania on the other hand offered only "tens of millions" of dollars in tax breaks, which means Shell walked away from something close to a quarter of a billion dollars to locate there rather than here.

Why?

First, as big as \$300 million in tax breaks sounds, it constitutes only about a 1 percent reduction in the future plant's operating costs - not that big of a deal just as tax breaks generally are not that big of a deal. Second, numerous studies show that companies' larger concerns when building or relocating are the availability of an educated and skilled workforce, a strong supplier base, transportation and communication infrastructure, and attractive communities - things West Virginia struggles to provide.

But, can't we invest in better educating our children, retraining our workers, making ourselves healthier, and building better infrastructure? The answer is, yes, we can and we should. But, we shouldn't expect those efforts to produce economic prosperity, at least not as it's conventionally defined.

All the time we're educating our children and retraining workers, most will still not be able to find jobs commensurate with their skills and knowledge in West Virginia. Many will migrate to other places leaving us still with a comparatively poorly educated and older workforce.

But, maybe that's OK.

Maybe West Virginia needs to change the paradigm for what constitutes success. Maybe the best thing we can do is educate our children and all West Virginians excellently and prepare them to achieve personal prosperity even if they find it elsewhere. After all, isn't that how most West Virginians already define success within the context of our own families?

We raise our children hoping they'll go to college and expect them afterward to seize opportunity wherever it arises - probably out of state. When they do, we count it as success. So, why shouldn't the state adopt that same outlook even if the results don't show up in standard measures of economic performance?

Maybe West Virginia needs its own standards, new standards focused on human outcomes rather than state outcomes. What would the new metrics of success be if the state adopted the same aspirations as its families and devoted its resources to supporting them? How would our taxing and spending priorities change?

These are important questions because success defined as economic prosperity is unobtainable for West Virginia by any means and our current strategy of tax cutting achieves neither that goal nor any other. So, it's time to change the goal.

We could do worse than to be the state that, like a family, takes care of its own, prepares its children well, and willingly sends them into the larger world ready to achieve success. And, if we do that, we'll probably find that gradually even traditional measures of economic performance will improve as well - a nice bonus, but by then, it won't matter nearly as much.

- Sean O'Leary's email is seanoleary@citlink.net.

[Save](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [Post a comment](#) |

Send

Be the first
of your

0

[Subscribe to journal-news.net](#)

journal-news.net

207 W. King Street , Martinsburg, WV 25402-0807 | 304-263-8931

© 2012. All rights reserved. | [Terms of Service and Privacy Policy](#)