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Gas fund support sought

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By WARREN SCOTT - Staff writer (wscott@heraldstaronline.com.) , The Herald-Star

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WELLSBURG - Brooke County commissioners were encouraged Tuesday to support the establishment of a statewide fund from taxes collected from natural gas drilling operations.

Paul Miller, policy outreach director for the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, told the commission the state is seeing a temporary boost from the drilling but would see a longer term benefit by establishing a fund for economic development with taxes collected from drillers.

Miller, who was accompanied by Rick Wilson of the American Friends Service Committee, a similar group, said severance taxes from coal, oil and gas generate about \$400 million per year but are collected on a one-time basis,

"When the resources are gone, so is the revenue," he said, comparing the situation to the turn of the 20th century when areas of West Virginia flourished with a coal mining boom but dramatically declined when the demand for coal decreased.

Miller said the state collects about \$65 million in severance tax from natural gas, a portion of which could be used to establish a mineral trust fund that over time could generate additional funds in interest to support the development of a more diverse economy.

Interest from the fund could be distributed to counties to support business startup or job training programs or improve roads and other infrastructure needed to support business development, he said.

Miller said mineral trust funds have been used by several states, including Alaska, where a fund established in 1976 has grown to \$40 billion.

He said the concept was proposed by state Sen. Jeff Kessler, D-New Martinsville, during the last legislative session. It died in committee but hasn't been abandoned, with a committee vice chaired by state Sen. Orphy Klempa, D-Wheeling, set to revisit it.

Miller and Wilson asked the commissioners to encourage state legislators to support such legislation.

County Commissioner Tim Ennis said of the fund, "That money could be put into water and sewage projects, bridges and roads that would make our area more attractive for businesses to come to."

County Commissioner Norma Tarr said she believes Brooke County has lost some influence on the state Legislature following redistricting that led to the elimination of two seats representing the county in the state House of Delegates.

She added Brooke and other counties are so financially strapped, they would be happy to receive as much tax money from natural gas as they can now.

Miller acknowledged the biggest argument for not establishing the

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Miller acknowledged the biggest argument for not establishing the fund is to use the revenue now. But he said setting aside funds to bring more diverse sources of jobs will have a greater impact on the state's future.

In other business, the commission accepted a bid of \$7,697 from Marshall Elevator Services of Pittsburgh for a steel fire door and other upgrades needed for the elevator at the former G.C. Murphy store to comply with state regulations.

The store will serve as the new site of the Brooke County Museum. Because it sits in the flood plain, museum board members have made plans to put exhibits on wheels so they may be moved easily onto the elevator and to the building's second floor.

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