

Trust fund for state interests commissioners
Addresses revenue from Marcellus drilling

BY NICOLE LEMAL TIMES WEST VIRGINIAN

FAIRMONT – What West Virginia decides to do with money it receives from Marcellus shale drilling could ultimately impact the state's financial shape even 20 years down the road.

And it sparked a lot of interest during Wednesday's Marion County Commission meeting.

Senate Bill 182, a bill that was introduced by Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, during the state's last legislative session, proposes that 25 percent of revenue coming to West Virginia from Marcellus shale drilling should be placed in a trust fund and left to accumulate for at least 20 years. A cap has not been set at this point.

Paul Miller, policy outreach director for the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, and Rick Wilson, project director of the American Friends Service Committee West Virginia Economic Justice Project, believe it could make an impact on the state in all possible aspects.

Money accrued from the fund could be used for infrastructure, education, and a number of other projects that may have shown a need. In an unstable economy, it's especially beneficial, if the money has been set aside during the boom, Miller said.

"During a down economy, it's very helpful to have this available to pay for current needs," he said.

Other states have taken advantage of this same principal, such as states like Alaska accumulating nearly \$40 billion since 1976. If West Virginia had adopted this idea in 1985, Miller said West Virginia could have had \$2 billion set aside in an account, with \$1.3 billion already spent on projects.

Coal production is estimated to decline by a third by 2035, according to the Energy Information Administration (EIA). Because West Virginia is dependent on mineral extraction industries, Miller said it's important to be prepared.

"We understand what that means for our economy," Miller said. "We've had a boom, and now we're anticipating a bust."

Looking toward the future and thinking ahead in this respect was an idea that Commissioner Randy Elliott embraced wholeheartedly.

"A lot of good things can happen if we watch our money and use it wisely," Elliott said. "We certainly understand the significance of severance tax we receive here in Marion County, and to put together a permanent trust fund, in my opinion, is a wonderful idea."

Marion County is just one of several steps Miller and Wilson have made, as they plan to prepare a resolution that would be circulated throughout the state.

In other business: • Advertisements for the sealed bids for the Marion County Courthouse skylights project will be published on June 13 and June 20. Bids are due July 6 and will be opened on July 11.

• The commission provided funding in the amount of \$500 to the Monongah Youth Club Inc., for its second annual concert event. Proceeds will benefit the further development of Higinbotham Field.