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By C.V. Moore

Register-Herald Reporter (<http://www.register-herald.com>)

The Fayette County Commission approved a resolution Friday supporting the creation of a West Virginia Mineral Trust Fund to save a portion of natural resource severance tax income for future economic development and infrastructure projects.

The fund is an effort to ensure that West Virginia reaps long-term benefits from short-term mineral extraction and maintains some degree of economic consistency within the boom-bust cycle associated with the energy industries.

"We have a chance to do better in the 21st century with natural resources than we did in the 20th century, and make it a more permanent source of wealth so every generation will benefit from what we have here and what's leaving here," says Paul Miller of the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy.

"We haven't really had a shared prosperity in this state, and yet we've had all this wealth. How do we not repeat that? Let's think ahead for our children and grandchildren," he says.

Miller has been meeting with county commissions and regional development authorities throughout the state in an effort to garner enough support for the trust fund to get it on next session's legislative agenda.

Already, gas-producing counties in northern West Virginia have signed on to the resolution. Montana, Wyoming, Alaska, North Dakota and other mining states already have such funds in place.

Details of the fund are not finalized. A Senate bill last term that would have established a fund based on a predicted future growth in gas collections did not pass.

Importantly, Miller says the permanent fund would be structured so as not to take away any money from the counties currently receiving gas and coal severance tax.

The principal of the fund would be untouchable and allowed to grow. The income from interest would provide revenue to “build a more prosperous and secure economy” for the state, says a brochure for the project.

“Fayette County is fortunate,” says Fayette County Commission President Matthew Wender. “The New River runs through it, and we have this God-given beauty. We’ve sort of transitioned ourselves from coal production of the last century.

“But McDowell County is an example of how that didn’t happen. They supplied so much coal to this country and they don’t have anything to show for it today, and it’s sad. ... God forbid we should do the same thing with gas development.”

At its last meeting, commissioners gave the go-ahead to the county’s fire coordinator to purchase a \$1 million property owned by North American River Runners (NARR) for use as a fire training academy.

Friday, they authorized Prosecuting Attorney Carl Harris to file a suit for declaratory judgment in the circuit court as to whether fire levy funds can be used for the purchase of the property and the establishment of the training facility for firefighters in Fayette County, and potentially other counties.

The action will compel the Fayette County Firemen’s Association to come before the court and argue for why it is a fair use of the taxpayers’ dollars.

Harris says if the association acts quickly, the judgment could be handed down before the end of July. The association is currently leasing the property and its option to purchase runs out before the end of the month, according to Fayette County Commissioner Denise Scalph.

The County Commission also on Friday a made formal motion to support an expansion to the Paint Creek Scenic Trail park project, which would involve the county leasing and taking ownership of additional property.

A proposed park would be located along Paint Creek Road near the Pax exit of the West Virginia Turnpike. The county already owns a piece of land in the area.

Todd Schoolcraft, a landscape architect with Michael Baker Inc., addressed the commission, proposing it lease land from the West Virginia Parkways Authority, as well as purchase some property from a private landowner in order to expand the planned park.

The Parkways Authority land consists of an old right of way along the old West Virginia Turnpike’s path.

Schoolcraft says there would be space for 20 RV campsites, a playground, pond, handicapped

fishing pier, picnic shelters, and other features.

“They call it the mini-New River Gorge,” says Schoolcraft. “It’s a rock-lined gorge around Paint Creek. It’s gorgeous,” he says.

“With the Boy Scout project coming, this whole area will need these kinds of amenities, and this is just off the turnpike exit.”

Schoolcraft cautions that plans are very preliminary at this point. Friday’s motion was merely to begin talks with the Parkways Authority.

The commission approved a \$11,251 contribution from the coal severance tax fund to the New River Humane Society for a new set of cat cages. A \$3,000 grant will pay for the remainder of the purchase.

Ron Cantley, director of Operations for the Fayette County Board of Education (BOE), updated the commission on his agency’s recycling program.

Cantley says the program, which recycles newspapers from volunteer schools in the county, is fiscally neutral for the BOE. The commission’s 50 percent matching funds and the Town of Fayetteville’s free pickup service within municipal limits both contribute to the program’s breaking even.

“Independent of the obvious environmental benefits to the community and the educational value to the students, the collective actions of the Fayette County Commission, the Town of Fayetteville and Fayette County Board of Education created a win-win solution for all entities involved,” says Cantley.

Participation among schools varies widely. Collins Middle School, Meadow Bridge Elementary and Mount Hope Elementary lead the county’s schools with a total of 13,740 pounds, 12,900 pounds and 7,160 pounds, respectively.

The total weight recycled from December 2011, to present is 42,520 pounds.

Both Cantley and President Wender say they would like to see more schools participating. Cantley and the Raleigh County Solid Waste Authority are exploring incentivizing the program.

Heather Lukacs of the New River Clean Water Alliance (NRCWA) thanked the commission for its support of the organization’s work. The NRCWA prioritizes and supports projects that improve the quality of creeks flowing into the New River.

Lukacs gave the commission an update on the Winona sewer project — which recently overcame one of its final administrative hurdles — and Oak Hill’s sewer improvement project. The county commission provided \$125,000 towards the Winona project, which will bring sewer access to over 100 homes in the Winona area.

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