

July 16, 2012

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Editorial: Develop plans for life after coal

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Too often, discussion of the future of coal, and of coal miners in West Virginia, takes a predictable and useless direction: You're either for coal or against it. If you have concerns about pollution or safety, you don't care about jobs.

Of course, it's the furthest thing from the truth, but seizing on false choices and exaggerating them offers a distraction. It plays on people's natural worries about their livelihood, their families and their communities. But fearful people tend not to make the best decisions. It is difficult to think too far ahead if you are afraid for the next month, or quarter.

Long-term thinking is exactly what West Virginians need.

In a recent commentary, Ted Boettner, executive director of the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, proposes the state create a Future Fund, or a permanent mineral trust fund fed by severance taxes on the state's mineral wealth.

It's an idea that we have applauded before.

By adding 1 percent to the 5 percent severance tax on coal, gas and oil, West Virginia could build a fund within a few years that would support efforts to make the state more prosperous. Western states such as Alaska, Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico, North Dakota and Utah set up funds in the 1970s. Today, they channel millions into education, health, economic development and other priorities in those states. And they will continue to do so even after the minerals are gone. If West Virginia had set up a fund in 1980, the people could be spending the interest on nearly \$2 billion today.

What could West Virginia do with that money? Health care, certainly. Schools, sure. How about turning the next generation of West Virginians into nurses and doctors? How about raising the next generation of engineers and chemists? How about helping this generation of adults prepare their minds and hands for something other than coal mining?

This issue has nothing to do with whether you are "for coal" or not. Everyone buys it. Everyone uses it. The issue is about math. It's about business, about having a skill or a product that others will pay for.

Some miners and working families have been led to believe that if coal companies could just get the EPA off their backs, then the future of coal would be bright in West Virginia.

"The reality is that coal is declining in West Virginia and it has more to do with market competition from natural gas and Western coal -- not to mention exhausted coal reserves -- than with any future EPA regulations," Boettner writes.

Latest federal projections say West Virginia will produce only 90 million tons of coal in 10 years, compared with 158 million in 2008. How do the southern coalfields plan to absorb this change?

Working people who know a job will end in six months don't sit in fear. They don't deny and lament the inevitable, not for long anyway. They get busy lining up their next opportunity. Why should a community, a county or a state be any different?

Wouldn't it be great if West Virginia stopped being afraid of the future?

5 Comments

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Posted By: lilpete391

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The real plan after coal will be more welfare and more food stamps!

Posted at: July 17, 2012 6:57:43 am

Posted By: Beezo

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West Virginians, rich and poor, young and old, powerful or powerless , educated or uneducated, are not afraid of the future. They're afraid of the energy companies.

Posted at: July 17, 2012 7:41:12 am

Posted By: rexcraigo

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It also has to do with the mathematics of the fact that coal will effectively be gone from this state in 50 years and the people relying on coal will be standing around the statehouse looking for the government to give them a handout.

Posted at: July 17, 2012 8:02:08 am

Posted By: dumb hillbilly

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WV needs to prepare for life without coal but the lifespan of coal should not be artificially shortened by a president and his appointed czars who hate coal. Also coal profits should be used to plan for the future, not to support "green" companies that only line their investors pockets.

Posted at: July 17, 2012 2:13:05 pm

Posted By: Indigo

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DH hit the nail on the head.

Posted at: July 17, 2012 2:59:15 pm