

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

The joint subcommittee studying measures to improve and enhance economic development in Southwest Virginia, pursuant to SJR 111

August 2, 2004
Wytheville, Virginia

Meeting Summary

The Southwest Virginia Economic Development Commission ("Commission") held its first meeting at Wytheville Community College in Wytheville, Virginia on August 2, 2004. Dr. Ann E. Alexander, President, Wytheville Community College, welcomed the Commission to the College. Commission members elected Senator Phillip P. Puckett as Chairman, and Delegate Terry Kilgore as Vice Chairman.

Review of the Lacy Commission

Neal Barber, Manager of Community Resources, Virginia Economic Development Partnership, reviewed the role, actions and impact of the 1985 Southwest Virginia Economic Development Commission ("Lacy Commission"). Mr. Barber's remarks are available at the Commission's legislative website at <http://dls.state.va.us/SJR111.HTM>. Mr. Barber recommended that the Commission focus on workforce development; affordable access to and use of broadband technology; increasing entrepreneurship; the potential for retirement communities; and specialized economic development products that require unique facilities for their production.

Delegate Joseph P. Johnson asked for clarification regarding the low level of educational attainment in Southwest Virginia, and whether the problem is partially attributable to a lack of educational opportunities. Mr. Barber noted that the percentages of graduates, literacy levels, and higher education levels all lag behind those in metropolitan areas. Although tremendous strides have been made in higher education in Southwest Virginia, there has not been a sufficient effort to make workforce training reflective of employer needs. Instead, training provided by local workforce investment boards typically is client-based.

Review of the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission

Dr. Wayne D. Purcell, Virginia Tech, briefed the Commission on the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission. Dr. Purcell's presentation will be available at the Commission's legislative website at <http://dls.state.va.us/SJR111.HTM>. Dr. Purcell noted that the Rural Virginia Prosperity Commission's recommendation for creation of a rural center had been passed by the General Assembly in 2004 (SB 407 and HB 1213) and that the Virginia Capital Access Program was funded for an additional \$500,000 in 2004. He stated that it is essential to attack isolation in rural communities, in part by expanding the wireless infrastructure to support cell phone access. The income disparity

between rural and urban areas is growing exponentially and rural areas increasingly contain an aging, less educated population due to the out migration of better-educated young people. For purposes of the Tiered Incentive Program, Southwest Virginia counties are divided into three "tiers," with Tier 1 containing the most economically stressed counties. Chairman Puckett noted that none of the Tier 1 counties has an interstate highway running through it. Dr. Purcell closed his comments by emphasizing the importance of Virginia's financial support of the Virginia Capital Access Program.

Formation of Subcommittees

Commission members reviewed the proposed structure of subcommittees to the Commission and identified potential members of the subcommittees. Members of the audience also recommended potential subcommittee members. The Chairman asked that any recommendations for subcommittee nominees not made at the meeting be given to Carl Mitchell, Virginia Economic Bridge.

Staff to the Commission advised the Commission that a legislative study guideline requires that legislation creating an interim study committee describe any subgroups the committee proposes to form. Because SJR 111, the legislation creating the Southwest Virginia Economic Development Commission, does not identify any subcommittees, the Commission must request an exemption from that guideline from the Joint Rules Committee.

If the exemption is granted, the Commission will proceed immediately with naming subcommittee members. Any initial subcommittee meetings likely would be held in October or November. Staff also briefed the Commission on the meetings limitation (one per quarter) and the requirement that all Commission meetings, and any subcommittee meetings, be noticed in accordance with Virginia's Freedom of Information Act. The Commission will request an exemption from the meetings limitation in order to hold two meetings in the fourth quarter.

Designation of Special Advisors

The Commission plans to appoint special advisors to the Commission who would provide guidance and information on specified issues. The Commission requested that suggestions for special advisors be provided to it for consideration.

Schedule for Subsequent Meetings

Delegate Griffith suggested that, because 2005 is an election year, Commission meetings should be held early in each quarter to the greatest extent possible. He recommended that meetings be scheduled for April, June and August.

Chairman Puckett noted that Commission member Sim Ewing had offered to host a Commission meeting at the University of Virginia - Wise. Commission member Dr. F. David Wilkin offered to host a meeting at Virginia Highlands Community College.

Further Discussion

Chairman Puckett opened the floor to comments and questions. Commission member Richard Settle noted that the Commission's charge is ambitious. A member of the audience stated that he hoped the Commission would not overlook traditional industrial economic development, which in the past has been a critical component of economic development in Southwest Virginia. Chairman Puckett emphasized that the Commission does not intend to exclude that form of economic development and will consider it along with other approaches. Carl Mitchell, Virginia Economic Bridge, noted that Commission members had been provided with notebooks that they should retain for use at future meetings, and that the Commission would have a site on Virginia Economic Bridge's website at www.virginiaeconomicbridge.org.

The Honorable Phillip P. Puckett, Chairman
The Honorable Terry G. Kilgore, Vice Chairman
Ellen Bowyer, Staff Attorney, Division of Legislative Services