



THE STATE JOURNAL



Staff photo by Chad Vaughn

Company officials and state leaders took part in breaking ground this month at the Frontieras site in Point Pleasant.

Mason County emerges as hub of economic resurgence with major industrial investments

QUICK TAKE:

■ Mason County is seeing a surge of major economic investments — including Nucor, Frontieras, Hope Gas and Monarch Compute Campus — signaling long-term regional growth beyond job creation.

■ The \$4 billion Nucor steel mill and \$40 billion Monarch data campus anchor the transformation, with thousands of construction jobs and significant permanent employment expected.

■ Local leaders say coordinated planning, infrastructure investment and pro-business policies are positioning the county as a hub for energy, manufacturing and advanced technology.

by Chad Vaughn
STAFF WRITER

POINTPLEASANT, W.Va. — A wave of major economic announcements has placed Mason County at the center of a growing regional resurgence, as projects from Frontieras, Monarch Compute Campus, Hope Gas and Nucor signal more than just new jobs.

Local officials, business leaders and economic developers say the surge reflects coordinated momentum years in the making, driven by strategic positioning, infrastructure investment and a renewed focus on attracting industry that is now yielding tangible results for the county's workforce and long-term outlook.

Construction of Nucor Corp.'s \$4 billion sheet steel mill, which broke ground in October 2023, is progressing steadily, with operations expected to begin in 2027, according to company officials.

The mill spans 1,700 acres between W.Va. Route 2 and the Ohio River and is expected to become one of the most technologically advanced and environmentally friendly steel production facilities in the world. It will feature electric arc furnaces and galvanizing lines, with a planned output of up to 3 million tons of sheet steel annually to serve the automotive, construction and industrial sectors.

The workforce is expected to peak at 2,000 during construction, with about 800 full-time positions anticipated once the facility is complete. Nucor has prioritized local hiring, partnering with community colleges and career centers to recruit talent.

The Apple Grove facility represents Nucor's largest single investment to date and the most significant manufacturing investment in West Virginia history, with an expected annual economic impact of \$2.5 billion.

With construction on schedule, the Apple Grove mill is positioned to become a cornerstone of both the domestic steel industry and the state's economic future.

Frontieras North America broke ground April 2 on an \$850 million plant in Mason County that will transform coal into various carbon-based products, marking a significant push for industrial modernization and regional employment.

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Eifert promoted to CFO at WV News

From Staff Reports

CLARKSBURG, W.Va. — Crystal Eifert has been promoted to chief financial officer for WV News and a group of affiliated, family-owned companies, President Brian Jarvis announced this week.

Eifert previously served as business manager and will now oversee financial strategy and operations across the organization's portfolio of companies.

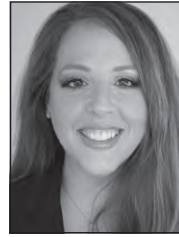
Jarvis cited Eifert's leadership, work ethic and commitment to continuous improvement as key factors in her promotion.

"Crystal brings an unmatched lev-

el of dedication to her work," Jarvis said. "She is constantly looking for ways to streamline processes and strengthen our operations. Our family of companies has benefited tremendously from her leadership, and I'm confident she will continue to drive us forward in this new role."

WV News Publisher Andy Kniceley praised Eifert's financial oversight and consistency.

"Since joining us as business man-



Eifert

ager, Crystal has kept a close watch on both the details and the bigger financial picture," Kniceley said. "Her dedication and discipline have been a major part of our success."

Eifert, 47, of Taylor County, joined WV News four years ago. She earned her Master of Business Administration in 2022 and a Bachelor of Science in 2009 from Fairmont State.

Before joining the organization, she spent approximately 10 years working as a controller for multiple companies.

As chief financial officer, Eifert will oversee financial operations for WV News, West Virginia Digital, Hydrocarbon Well Services, Big Sand Drill-

ing Company, and several other affiliated companies.

Eifert said she appreciates the organization's positive workplace culture.

"My coworkers — everyone is just so pleasant and genuinely enjoys being here," she said. "It's a great environment to be part of."

She added that Jarvis "is the best boss I've ever had."

Eifert is married with two children and five grandchildren. She also volunteers on the Taylor County Fair Board and serves as treasurer for the West Virginia Memorial Day Committee.

Kabourek hired as chief financial officer of West Virginia University

From Staff Reports

West Virginia University President Michael T. Benson recently announced the hiring of Chris Kabourek as the university's new chief financial officer.

Kabourek brings nearly 30 years of significant fiscal experience in higher education to the role. He most recently served as senior vice president for administration and planning at The Ohio State University where he led one of the university's largest administrative portfolios, spanning public safety, information technology, campus planning, facilities, real estate and major capital projects.

"In Chris, we've found a creative, dynamic, forward-looking, and solutions-focused CFO who is steeped in the workings of large, public, flagship research institutions, like West Virginia University," Benson said.

The university's Division of Finance

includes strategic planning and analysis, budget planning, institutional accounting, reporting and analysis, payroll, procurement contracting and payment services, risk management and insurance, tax services and treasury operations.

Additionally, Kabourek will oversee Information Technology Services and Facilities Operations, which includes teams responsible for transportation and parking, facilities maintenance, environmental health and safety, roads and grounds, custodial services, construction, real estate and sustainability across the Evansdale, Downtown and Health Sciences areas of the Morgantown Campus.

"The West Virginia University mission is too important for anything less than clear priorities, strong support for its people, and a commitment to investing in the work that matters most," Kabourek said.

Throughout his nearly 30-year career in higher education, the Nebraska native and first-generation college student has provided leadership to support strategic planning, information technology, and scholarship and

financial aid programs.

Prior to becoming a Buckeye, Kabourek held numerous positions over 27 years with the University of Nebraska System, including interim president and senior vice president and chief financial officer.

As interim president, Kabourek closed a budget gap of more than \$40 million, delivered a balanced budget to the incoming president, maintained strong relationships with policymakers and external stakeholders, and led the successful recruitment of Athletic Director Troy Dannen from the University of Washington.

He also launched the Presidential Scholars Program, a full cost-of-attendance scholarship initiative designed to help Nebraska compete more effectively for top in-state students.

As Nebraska's CFO from 2018 until becoming interim president in 2024, Kabourek oversaw all financial and administrative services, supporting a \$3 billion annual operating budget and helped modernize the university's financial and capital framework.

He maintained the university's Aa1 Moody's credit rating, led major bond

transactions, modernized and restructured the institution's debt program, advanced a long-term deferred maintenance strategy, and helped strengthen the university's competitiveness through both need-based and merit-based financial aid.

Kabourek earned a bachelor's degree from Nebraska Wesleyan University and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"I'm excited to get to work with President Benson, incoming Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Beverly Wendland, members of the Board of Governors, and other senior leaders and campus partners to help ensure West Virginia's resources are aligned behind its priorities, its momentum continues to grow, and its future reflects something all West Virginians can be proud of," Kabourek said.

CSA Search and Consulting LLC supported the WVU Search Advisory Committee through the CFO hiring process.

Kabourek's official start date is June 1.



Kabourek

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Stakeholders say EMS funding is a start at addressing the mounting problems

QUICK TAKE:

■ West Virginia established its first permanent EMS funding stream, allocating \$12 million annually from the State Lottery Fund to combat staffing shortages and closures.

■ The legislation includes \$1 million specifically for mental health services to support first responders dealing with job-related trauma and high turnover rates.

■ While officials call the move a historic first step, they acknowledge more support is needed to eliminate dangerous response delays in rural areas.

by Faithlyn Graham
STAFF WRITER

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — For the first time in state history, West Virginia is establishing a permanent funding stream for emergency medical services as lawmakers respond to growing concerns over staffing shortages, agency closures and delayed emergency response times.

House Bill 5168, which passed during the 2026 regular legislative session and was signed into law by Gov. Patrick Morrisey, allocates up to \$12 million annually from the State Lottery Fund to support EMS agencies across the state.

The bill also sets aside \$1 million specifically for mental health services for EMS personnel.

The legislation comes after years of mounting strain on the state's EMS system. According to industry leaders, more than 40 agencies have closed in recent years, leaving some communities without reliable ambulance coverage.

"We've been working with the Legislature for a number of years now, trying to get some funding in place from the state to help support ambulance response and to ensure that the trucks can be available when needed in every community because currently they aren't," said Chris Hall of the West Virginia EMS Coalition.

Hall said West Virginia previously was the only state in the region without a dedicated, permanent EMS funding source.

"To have a strong EMS system, we've always felt that you need three sources of funding. You have to have good strong insurance reimbursement pol-



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The legislation includes \$1 million annually for mental health services for EMS personnel.

icies. You have to have local funding from the counties. And, you have to have state funding, as well," Hall said. "So with this legislation, West Virginia joins those states in saying, 'We support EMS,' and that funding will kind of help complete that three-legged stool and put EMS agencies on a much more solid foundation."

Del. Anitra Hamilton, D-Monongalia, said while the bill is an important step forward, it does not fully address the scale of the issue.

"Does this bill do enough? Absolutely not. Most of what we do doesn't do enough, but it is a start," Hamilton said. "For the first time, we have been able to secure funding for EMS, which was the ultimate goal."

Hamilton said she became more aware of the crisis during her time working on a legislative subcommittee focused on EMS and fire services.

"I was able to see [during] my first session, just statewide, the massive shortage, and just learn more in depth the funding needs," she said.

Despite the progress, she noted that the funding will be spread thin across the state.

"The \$12 million, which will come

from the State Lottery Fund, is a start. Is it stretched thin already? Absolutely, because there are some counties that don't have EMS at all," Hamilton said.

EMS professionals say the funding could help address one of the industry's most pressing challenges: Retention.

"EMS is a very difficult field to work in, and we're increasingly seeing tragedy amongst the workforce," Hall said. "The pay is incredibly low compared to other health care professions, so what we're really hoping for is that by making this funding available ... to help offset some of the fixed costs ... that we can free up dollars to improve wages [for] EMS workers ... and help with that retention."

Donna Wade, assistant chief of the Marion County Rescue Squad, said the bill is especially significant because it creates a consistent funding source where none previously existed.

"Up until now, we have not had any funding statewide for any EMS in the state," Wade said. "So, you know they're calling it historic, so we're very excited about it."

Wade said agencies like hers are al-

ready considering how the funding could be used to improve operations and retain staff.

"We plan to use that for retention here, and then we're hoping ... we can use it for better equipment and then upgrading and getting more stuff in here to take better care of our patients," she said.

One of the most notable aspects of the bill is its focus on mental health. The first \$1 million allocated each year will go toward mental health treatment for EMS personnel — a need many say has long been overlooked.

"We see people on their worst days, and you know it's always been, 'Do the call and move on,'" Wade said. "Mental health in the past has really been pushed aside, so I'm really grateful for the state ... to support mental health because I feel like in the past it's always been overlooked."

Hamilton also emphasized the importance of that funding, particularly given the trauma EMS workers regularly experience.

"They literally experience trauma every day ... they may not talk about it, but it affects them and how they live," she said. "So this is so important, and surely a million dollars is not enough, but it is a start."

In many rural areas, the lack of EMS coverage has already led to dangerous delays in response times.

Wade said agencies often rely on mutual aid systems, where neighboring counties respond when local crews are unavailable.

"It could possibly be to over an hour before an ambulance gets to you ... that's life or death," she said.

Even with its limitations, lawmakers and EMS leaders agree the bill marks a turning point.

"Going from zero to \$12 million is a huge increase," Hall said. "Is it gonna be enough to solve every community's problems? No, it's not ... but it's a start."

For Hamilton, the focus now is on building momentum.

"I hope, going forward, more legislators will get behind our first responders and provide them the funding that they need so that we can have a healthier West Virginia and a more responsive West Virginia," she said.



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AGRICULTURE

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Home-produced food products now allowed for sale in W.Va. stores

QUICK TAKE:

■ West Virginia Senate Bill 44 allows home kitchen producers to sell their products in grocery stores, restaurants and even online without being restricted by state level inspection and licensing.

■ These products are to be kept separate from other commercial grade food products on grocery store shelves and will carry warnings that they could contain cross-contact allergens not listed on the label.

■ Senate Bill 44 does not permit the sale of wild game meat which is still strictly prohibited due to the increased potential of food borne illnesses and species decimation.

by Damian Phillips
STAFF WRITER

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Starting

this summer, those buying food at farmers markets, grocery stores, restaurants and even online may see some new products for sale.

West Virginia Senate Bill 44, which goes into effect June 12, significantly reduces regulations surrounding food products made in home kitchens.

But, according to state Agriculture Commissioner Kent Leonhardt, how significant an impact SB 44 will have on the local food production industry is still unknown.

“We worked with the Legislature on that bill to make it where we still maintain food safety, yet we were able to get more products out into the mar-

ket,” he said. But, he continued, “it remains to be seen” if producers will take advantage of deregulation.

Still, he called SB 44 “a step in the right direction.”

But, when asked whether he felt SB 44 would increase the number of locally produced products on grocery shelves, Leonhardt said: “That’s always the desire. We hope it does.”

While increasing the number of locally grown products would be a benefit both to the state economy and to local farmers, Leonhardt said, it will ultimately be up to farmers to market and distribute their products.

Additionally, Leonhardt seemed unsure whether deregulation would lead to more online sales of home-produced food goods.

“When somebody can actually physi-

cally hold [a product] ... and [can] sample and taste [it], they’re more likely to buy it. That makes food online a little bit harder to sell. But once somebody knows about the product from one of the markets, then obviously, if they like it and they’ll be able to buy it online, that certainly is an avenue for our producers to expand on,” he said.

Under the bill, agricultural producers will be allowed to sell goods made in home kitchens — which are not subject to state inspection and licensing — to local restaurants, grocery stores and online in addition to at farmers markets. But these products will not be sold alongside goods produced by entities that are subject to inspection and licensing.

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Leonhardt

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WVU Medicine planning more than \$350M in capital projects Third-consecutive year of investments totals more than \$1.2 billion

QUICK TAKE:

■ WVU Health System approved \$350 million for 2026 infrastructure projects, bringing its three-year capital investment total to more than \$1.2 billion across the region.

■ Key projects include a \$135 million patient tower in Parkersburg, a new Ohio community hospital, and expanded cancer, surgical, and behavioral health facilities.

■ The initiative aims to improve healthcare access, modernize aging facilities, and boost local economies by creating jobs throughout West Virginia, Maryland, and Ohio.

For WV News

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — For the third consecutive year, the WVU Health System Board of Directors has approved a plan to invest hundreds of millions of dollars into the health care infrastructure of West Virginia and the surrounding region.

The projects, which are subject to regulatory approval, will be in Charleston, Fairmont, Keyser, Morgantown, Parkersburg, Princeton and Weirton in West Virginia; Oakland, Maryland; and St. Clairsville, Ohio.

Collectively, they include more than \$350 million in investments, bringing WVU Medicine's three-year total of capital improvement projects to more than \$1.2 billion.

"This continues our momentum of expanding access across the region to improve the health trajectory of the communities we serve, while also giving local economies a needed boost, as these projects will create new jobs and economic opportunities for thousands," said Albert L. Wright Jr., president and CEO of the WVU Health System, on Wednesday.

"Our growth and expansion are always mission-based and intentional and always intended to provide better service and access to those we serve," Wright said.

The 2026 capital improvement projects:

Camden Clark Medical Center in Parkersburg – New Patient Tower

A \$135 million investment will

fund a new patient tower, increasing inpatient bed capacity from 260 to 300 and putting the hospital on the path to all private rooms.

The project includes four additional surgical suites; a proposed women's and children's floor offering private labor, delivery, recovery, and postpartum rooms, along with dedicated operating rooms for cesarean sections directly on the unit; and 450 additional parking spaces. The new patient tower will be connected via walkways to the existing hospital.

Estimated Cost: \$135 million

Anticipated Completion: Q2 2029

Fairmont Medical Center – **Phase**

III Expansion

A \$68.1 million investment will fund the demolition of 80-plus-year-old structures located on the Fairmont Medical Center campus along with construction of a new three-story building in their place, including a loading dock and materials management storage space, outpatient clinic, and shelled space in support of on-campus primary care and specialty care services.

Estimated Cost: \$68.1 million

Anticipated Completion: Q4 2028

Garrett Regional Medical Center in Oakland, Maryland – Radiation Oncology Center

The \$15 million investment will build a three-story, 21,000 square foot addition to the hospital, which will include a new radiation oncology center, including a new PET CT and additional clinical space to support the cancer care service in half of the square footage. Half of the total square footage will be shelled for future expansion that will include a well-patient program and space for the WVU Heart and Vascular Institute.

Estimated Cost: \$15 million

Anticipated Completion: Q2 2029

Potomac Valley Hospital in Keyser – Orthopedic Suite

This project will develop the final space in the Potomac Valley Plaza complex for an orthopedic and podiatry center. The space will include 12 exam rooms, support space, and a ra-

diology room to support the orthopedic practice.

Estimated Cost: \$2.5 million

Anticipated Completion: Q4 2026

Princeton Community Hospital – New Medical Office Building

This \$25.5 million investment builds a four-story, 50,636 square foot medical office building adjacent to the main hospital campus. The modern facility will consolidate seven physician practices and outpatient therapies, improving access for patients and supporting future growth for additional services for the community.

Estimated Cost: \$25.5 million

Anticipated Completion: June 2028

Thomas Hospitals in Charleston – Nuclear Medicine

A \$4 million investment will fund the move of the Nuclear Medicine service line to a space that can physically support the load of the new equipment. The new location is co-located with the WVU Heart and Vascular Institute clinic and hospital services, improving patient experience and convenience. Replacing two of the four cameras will improve patient throughput.

Estimated Cost: \$4 million

Anticipated Completion: Q1 2027

Thomas Hospitals – Surgical Intensive Care Unit

An \$8.7 million investment will fund the renovation of a unit previously leased to hospice. This 14-bed unit will increase inpatient bed capacity and allow the WVU Heart and Vascular Institute and other highly complex surgical cases to be consolidated in one intensive care unit.

Estimated Cost: \$8.7 million

Anticipated Completion: Q1 2027

Weirton Medical Center – New Cancer Center

This \$20.1 million project will build a one-story, 17,000-square-foot cancer center affiliated with the WVU Cancer Institute on the hospital's main campus. This state-of-the-art facility will bring Radiation Oncology to Weirton Medical Center and drive growth of the medical oncology services allowing for an expansion of

chemotherapy infusion services.

For the first time, cancer patients in the Weirton area will be able to pursue radiation treatments on campus utilizing a medical linear accelerator to deliver a focused high-energy electron beam targeting tumors. The facility will also house a specialized CT and three Radiation Oncology exam rooms to complement already existing cancer services.

Estimated Cost: \$20.1 million

Anticipated Completion: Q1 2029

Wheeling Hospital – Construction of a Small Community Hospital in St. Clairsville, Ohio

The two-story, 55,000 square foot facility will include inpatient beds, an emergency department, and outpatient imaging and lab services. There will be 14 specialty clinics and primary care services, as well as the addition of new services.

Estimated Cost: \$56 million

Anticipated Completion: 2027

WVU Hospitals in Morgantown – Relocation and Expansion of Outpatient Behavioral Health Services

An \$18.5 million investment will fund the relocation and expansion of outpatient behavioral health services to a new location within the WVU Innovation Corporation. The project includes moving several existing clinic sites to a new, consolidated location with significant expansion in outpatient clinic capacity to support growing demand for services in the region.

Estimated Cost: \$18.5 million

Anticipated Completion: Q3 2027

The 2024 capital projects included a new home for the WVU Eye Institute and a new cancer center at Princeton Community Hospital, both of which have broken ground, as well as the construction of the Elkins Corridor Medical Center, which opened to patients in September 2025.

Last year's capital projects included an outpatient pediatrics center and regional cancer center in Wheeling, which broke ground in August 2025 and March 24 of this year, respectively.

For more information on WVU Medicine, visit WVUMedicine.org.

WVU researchers develop ‘revolutionary’ nanomaterial

Development boosts energy, oxygen production for AI facilities, space exploration

QUICK TAKE:

■ Breakthrough in energy tech: WVU researchers discovered a way to stabilize nanoionics at high temperatures, dramatically improving the efficiency and versatility of solid oxide cells.

■ Game-changer for AI and space: The technology could power energy-hungry AI data centers and enable fuel and oxygen production for missions on the moon and Mars.

■ Years in the making: The advancement caps more than a decade of research and could open the door to a new era of high-performance, reversible energy systems.

by John Mark Shaver
FAIRMONT NEWS EDITOR

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — A team of West Virginia University researchers has made a “significant” discovery regarding the application of microscopic nanoionics and how they can revolutionize energy systems powering AI facilities and providing life support to spacefaring operations.

Dr. Xueyan Song, George B. Berry Chair of Engineering at WVU’s Benjamin M. Statler College of Engineering and Mineral Resources, explained that nanoionics studies how ions move in “ultra-small” materials and how that movement can be controlled.

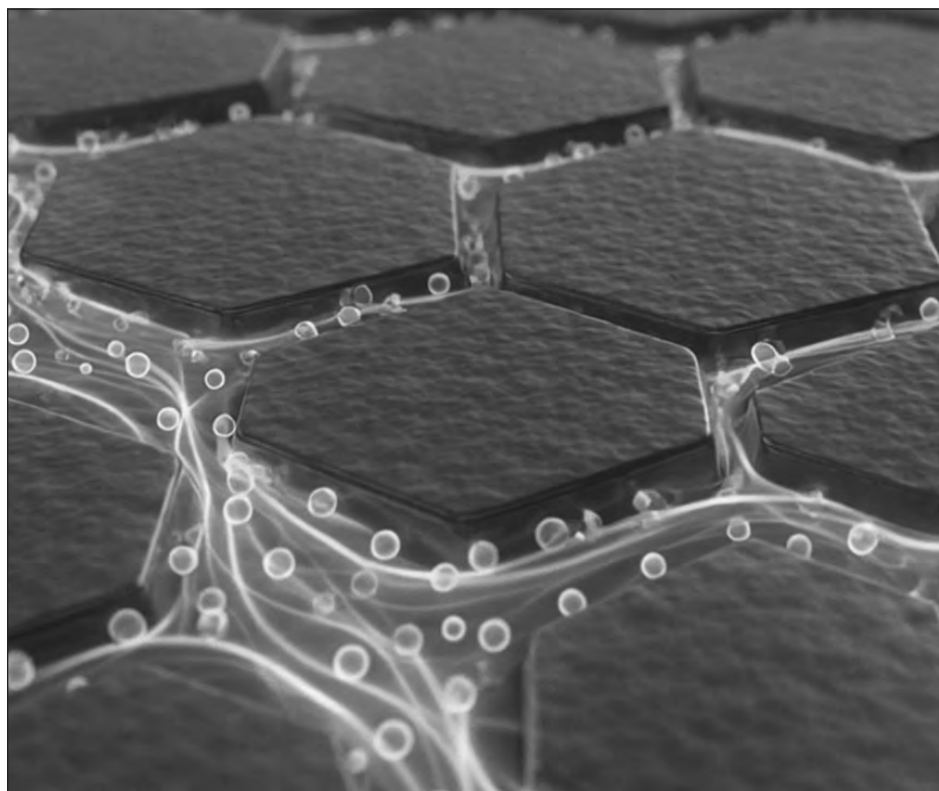


Song

Song likened the ions to microscopic cars that travel along the “roads” of grain boundaries on the surface of oxide materials. If an oxide material has a higher density of grain boundaries, then the ions can travel exponentially faster along their surface.

The performance of solid oxide cells is dependent on this transport of ions, and Song said that she and her team have been working for years to apply the study of nanoionics to increase their efficiency.

“Solid oxide cells consist of three components sandwiched together: a fuel electrode, an air electrode and an electrolyte,” Song said. “Each of those components requires oxygen ion trans-



Submitted photo

This rendering shows how nanoionics travel in the microscopic grains of “ultra-small” materials. A team of WVU researchers has discovered a way to utilize this process to increase energy efficiency.

port. A solid oxide cell can work as either a solid oxide fuel cell (SOFC) or a solid oxide electrolysis cell (SOEC). An SOFC makes electricity from fuel, (and) an SOEC makes fuel from electricity. ...

“A solid oxide fuel cell is a highly efficient power generator, with efficiency two-to-three times that of a diesel or natural gas generator. Instead of burning fuel like a car engine, it uses an electrochemical reaction.”

Song and her team applied an atom-thin layer of nanomaterials with a high density of grain boundaries to completely encapsulate a solid oxide cell, essentially increasing the density of ionic and electrical pathways on a material without changing the nature of it.

“By keeping the material chemistry and only increasing the grain boundary densities, the impact on the mate-

rial’s performance is stunning,” she said. “The commercial value is like turning carbon black into a diamond.” Previously, nanoionics were thought to be “thermally unstable” and impractical to use with devices operating above 500 C, with the nanograins losing stability after continued exposure to high heat.

However, through their research, Song’s team was able to demonstrate stability of the grain boundaries for more than 1,000 hours at 850 C.

“This is the first time that we implanted the nanoionics into the practical device of inherently functional solid oxide cells, and we show that it simultaneously improves the performance in both fuel cell and electrolysis modes,” Song said. “While the fuel cell mode increase is exciting, the impact of nanoionics on the electrolysis is revolutionary. Commercial SOFCs do not

operate as SOECs directly, and SOECs usually experience catastrophic electrode delamination. Once the nanoionics are added, the SOFC could function as an SOEC with unprecedented record-high performance.”

Song explained that this discovery — especially the coating’s ability to allow functional solid oxide fuel cells to “reverse” and become solid oxide electrolysis cells — has a wide berth of practical applications.

“What is fascinating about this technology is that, once we have water and nuclear power or solar energy, we can turn the water or carbon dioxide into fuels anywhere using reversible solid oxide cells,” Song said. “It makes the SOEC immediately feasible for space applications. In other words, once such an SOEC is powered by solar or nuclear power in space, the SOEC could simultaneously generate the fuel — of hydrogen and carbon monoxide using water and carbon dioxide — and oxygen on the moon and Mars.”

Additionally, Song said, nanoionics could be applied to dramatically increase the “performance of thermoelectric materials that could perform the solid-state cooling and take the extra heat away from the AI GPUs” in data centers.

Song said that this discovery is the culmination of more than a decade of work at WVU, and she believes that it will be revolutionary as the world’s energy needs continue to grow.

“This research work marks the beginning of a new era enabled by thermally stable nanoionics for various applications,” she said. “The nanoionics enable the reversible solid oxide cells for forming a closed-loop system for power generation, fuel production and life support for human space exploration. This nanoionics could be integrated into various applications, such as thermoelectrics for solid-state cooling for AI thermal management, thermoelectric power generation and superconductors for fusion.”

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FOOD

(Continued from Page 5)

Leonhardt said he anticipates the majority of these products will be seen on grocery store shelves as opposed to being sold in restaurants, as he has yet to hear about interest in the bill from restaurant owners.

To ensure transparency in retail settings, home-produced items must be kept in a separate section or display case with clear signage stating they are home-made and exempt from state licensing.

This bill will permit the sale of not only homegrown fresh produce, but also what the state classified as “potentially hazardous” food products like cream-filled pastries and acidified canned vegetables.

The delivery of these products is, however, regulated.

Potentially hazardous products may not be transported more than two hours from the production site to the consumer, while in transit appropriate temperatures must be maintained, and items cannot be transported more than once before reaching the consumer.



Courtesy Morgantown Farmers Market

Meat, poultry and dairy products remain the most stringently regulated of home-produced food products including rules around their transportation to market.

In order to sell potentially hazardous products to stores and other vendors, producers must obtain a “Cottage Food Vendor Permit.”

This permit replaces the need for local health department inspections and commercial kitchen licenses for most home-based businesses.

And once on shelves, these products must be tagged with a warning label stating the product was made in a non-commercial kitchen that may not have been subject to inspection and, as such, may contain cross-contact allergens not included in the allergen statement.

SB 44 also preempts local law and prohibits county and municipal governments from creating stricter regulations to ban or burden the sale of such products. However, local health departments and the Department of Agriculture retain the power to investigate and shut down production if a foodborne illness is reported.

“The permits are a way for us to track products. And that’s always been done in coordination, a lot of times, with the health departments,” Leonhardt said.

While meat, poultry and dairy items have also been deregulated to an extent, they remain the most strictly regulated products that may be sold under the bill, as they must be delivered in person, whereas all other food products may be

delivered using a third-party courier service.

This bill does not permit the commercial sale of game meats like venison, squirrel or bear, as it only includes farm-raised meat.

The sale of game meat, Leonhardt said, “is a whole different ballgame.”

The sale of farm-raised venison is allowed. But due to the potential presence of diseases that could cause foodborne illnesses, and the potential for species to be decimated as hunters look to take meat to market, the sale of game meat is strictly prohibited.

“There’s a lot of reasons around not doing that,” Leonhardt said. “We’re concerned with food safety. Obviously, when you go to the grocery store, you have an expectation that when you pull that product off the shelf that it’s going to be safe to eat.”

If the Legislature were to move toward deregulating the sale of game meat in the future, Leonhardt said, rather than his office, the Division of Natural Resources would likely be closely involved.

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S.C. case weighs if alleged promise in court of no record can void plea

QUICK TAKE:

■ The West Virginia Supreme Court is weighing whether a defendant's plea is invalid after a magistrate allegedly revoked a promise to allow firearms during home incarceration.

■ The dispute highlights a lack of transparency in magistrate courts, which are not "courts of record," leaving no official transcripts to verify verbal judicial promises.

■ If the plea stands, the defendant faces 45 days in the Southern Regional Jail.

by **Matt Harvey**
MANAGING EDITOR

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — An alleged promise by a magistrate involving gun possession on home incarceration — and the timing of when it might have been withdrawn — are the central points at issue in a case currently briefed before the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals.

The outcome of this procedural dispute will determine whether a defendant must serve time in a regional jail facility where several people have died since 2020.

Lewisburg attorney Paul S. Detch, a member of the West Virginia Bar for nearly 53 years, is arguing the case on behalf of his client, 38-year-old Logan Camp of White Sulphur Springs.

The case is of note not only for its constitutional implications regarding the Second Amendment but also for what it reveals about the lack of transparency in the state's lower court systems.

The origins of the plea

Camp initially was charged with misdemeanor second-offense driving on an operator's license revoked for driving under the influence (DUI).

In the hierarchy of West Virginia traffic offenses, a second-offense charge carries heavier penalties than a first.

To resolve the matter, Camp entered a "no contest" plea to a reduced charge of misdemeanor first-offense driving on an operator's license revoked for DUI.

This plea was made with a specific recommendation by a Greenbrier County assistant prosecutor for a sentence of home incarceration rather than active jail time.

A "no contest" plea, or *nolo contendere*, carries the same immediate legal effect as a guilty plea in terms of sentencing, but it allows a defendant to accept a



J. Alex Wilson / West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals

Chief Justice C. Haley Bunn and justices William R. Wooton, Charles S. Trump IV, Thomas H. Ewing and Gerald M. Titus III set the case for Rule 19 arguments on Wednesday, April 22.

conviction without explicitly admitting fault.

However, for such a plea to be valid under the Constitution, it must be made "knowingly and intelligently." This means the defendant must fully understand the consequences of the deal they are signing.

Detch insists that during the process of taking the plea, the Greenbrier County magistrate presiding over the case was asked a specific and vital question by Camp: "whether he would be permitted to retain his firearms while on home incarceration."

According to the defense, the answer

to that question was the pivot point for the entire agreement.

"The magistrate specifically assured him that he could keep his firearms and marked and initialed on the plea form authorizing him to have his firearms," Detch wrote in his brief. "The magistrate also marked the same on the instructions to the home incarceration authorities."

The record

The conflict began when Camp attempted to begin his sentence.

When he applied for home incarceration, the home incarceration officer informed him that the program could not accept him. The reason given was the

very provision Camp thought he had secured: The program would not allow him to maintain firearms in the residence while under supervision.

In the subsequent paperwork, the provision allowing firearms is clearly crossed out and initialed by the magistrate. However, the timing of that edit is a key question. Detch argues it was done after the plea was already finalized; the state argues it was never a valid part of the agreement to begin with.

This dispute is complicated by the fact that West Virginia magistrate courts are not "courts of record."

See COURT, 12

MASON

(Continued from Page 1)

Company executives and local officials said the project is designed to expand the use of regional natural resources and support long-term economic growth. Located on 183 acres along the Ohio River, the development is expected to create more than 2,000 construction jobs and more than 200 permanent positions once operational.

The facility will use specialized technology to process coal into fertilizers, industrial carbon materials and fuels with extremely low sulfur content. The approach aims to generate sustained demand for Appalachian coal by expanding its use beyond traditional roles in steel production and electricity generation.

Company leaders selected West Virginia over sites in Wyoming and Texas, citing the local labor pool, business environment and logistical advantages. The location offers rail access, river transportation and proximity to coal sources, making it an ideal hub for manufacturing and distribution.

In March, Hope Gas announced a \$250 million pipeline expansion in Mason County that is expected to create more than 600 construction jobs and strengthen energy service for homes, businesses and manufacturers.

Gov. Patrick Morrisey said the investment reflects the state's growing appeal to energy companies and highlights broader economic progress.

"Companies like Hope Gas are choosing West Virginia because they see a state that is competitive, energy-dominant and serious about growth," Morrisey said.

"My understanding is that project is going to be helping to fuel new homes that are going to be built in Mason County. And we're talking about a significant number of neighborhoods that are going to have access to affordable energy," he said.

Plans are also advancing for the Monarch Compute Campus, a large-scale data center development in Point Pleasant expected to bring thousands of jobs and long-term economic benefits.

The campus has been in development for more than three years and was recently acquired by Nscale. Officials said the project is designed to support hyperscale and enterprise data centers requiring consistent, reliable power. It will be built in phases and is expected to generate up to 8 gigawatts of electricity through a self-supplied, behind-the-meter system that will not draw from local utilities or affect customer rates.

The development will combine natural gas generation from the Appala-



Staff photo by Chad Vaughn

WV State Del. Jim Butler at the Progress and Prosperity Summit.

chian Basin with battery energy storage systems to meet the heavy and fluctuating demands of artificial intelligence computing. Mason County was selected for its access to fiber infrastructure, rail service, water resources and major transportation corridors. Enabled by House Bill 2014, which allows certain large-scale microgrids to operate as independent utilities, the project has drawn praise from Morrisey, U.S. Sen. Jim Justice and state legislative leaders, who say it positions West Virginia as a hub for energy-intensive industries.

Company officials said the campus will become one of the largest "AI factories" globally, occupying more than 2,000 acres and representing a \$40 billion investment. Construction is expected to begin this summer, with operations projected to start in the second half of 2027.

"We chose Mason County as the location for Monarch, and when you look at the impact it can have for Monarch in Mason County and Point Pleasant, it was staggering," said Dan Shapiro, Nscale's chief power and energy officer.

Mason County Development Authority Executive Director Anna Rittenhouse said the project will have impact beyond the county.

"When we look at what this brings to us, it does expand beyond Mason County. It's going to have a huge impact regionally and for the state," Rittenhouse said.

Mason County leaders said the surge in developments across the county re-

flects a deliberate strategy.

"Our objective is to grow the economy in Mason County through industrial development and every aspect that touches your lives. We are currently working diligently on plans with our local delegates and our federal representatives to find funding from other collaborative organizations to support Route 2 and infrastructure in 62, whether it's water, sewer, infrastructure, fiber or housing. We're working diligently to bring developers into our communities," Rittenhouse said.

Rittenhouse also credited retired former Development Authority leader John Musgrave for helping bring the projects to the county.

Mason County Commission President Rick Handley said the growth the county is experiencing appears like it was inevitable in retrospect.

"Mason County has long been a hidden gem, and with its rail and river access, available land and growing interest from businesses — sparked by Nucor's investment — we're now seeing the results of strong federal, state and local collaboration, positioning us for steady job growth, a stronger tax base and more opportunities for young people to stay and build their futures here; the challenge now is supporting that growth with housing, infrastructure and re-

sponsible development that preserves the county's character while making it a place where families and businesses can thrive," Handley said.

Point Pleasant Mayor Amber Tatterson said the city must balance growth with community needs.

"Point Pleasant is becoming a hub of economic interest thanks to its prime rail and river access, and while this growth brings real opportunities like jobs and increased tax revenue, our responsibility is to ensure it's sustainable, aligned with our community's values and benefits residents by protecting quality of life, strengthening infrastructure and creating a future where our kids can build their careers here at home," Tatterson said.

Del. Jim Butler, R-Mason, said legislative efforts have helped create a favorable business climate and expressed optimism about the county's future.

"I think policies like right-to-work, legal and tax reforms and better management have helped create a stronger business climate, and what we're seeing now is a return to a modernized version of the vibrant Main Street Point Pleasant once had — with real opportunities for people to live, work and raise families here, supported by a growing tax base that will improve roads, services and overall quality of life," Butler said.



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COURT

(Continued from Page 10)

Unlike circuit courts, which employ official court reporters to create a verbatim transcript of every word spoken, magistrate proceedings are often unrecorded.

This means there is no neutral record to verify what the magistrate told Camp in the heat of the moment. Without a transcript, the Supreme Court is left to weigh the conflicting testimony of the parties and the scribbles on the plea paperwork.

The stakes: Southern Regional Jail

With the home incarceration deal off the table, a circuit judge upheld the magistrate court's decision to sentence Camp to 45 days of active incarceration.

This sentence probably would be served at the Southern Regional Jail — a facility that has become a flashpoint for controversy in West Virginia.

The jail has been under intense fire for its mortality rate and living conditions. Since 2020, the facility has seen several inmate deaths.

The case is of note not only for its constitutional implications regarding the Second Amendment but also for what it reveals about the lack of transparency in the state's lower court systems.

These incidents have sparked federal civil rights investigations, indictments of correctional officers, and a \$4 million class-action settlement regarding "inhumane" conditions.

Considering that backdrop, the difference between home incarceration and a 45-day sentence at Southern Regional appears not just a matter of convenience.

The state's rebuttal

Senior Assistant Attorney General Michele Duncan Bishop, supported by research from intern Abigail Badley of the Regent University School of Law, responded to the appeal by emphasizing the importance of "finality" in the legal system.

Bishop wrote that Camp's "requested relief would offend this State's 'settled policy of giving finality to criminal sentences' that are imposed after a defendant knowingly and voluntarily enters a plea." She argued that Camp bargained with the State to have a charge dismissed and that the State upheld its end of the deal.

"But [Camp] proved noncompliant with his part by refusing to accept his criminal sentence and, ultimately, failing to submit to the court's authority," Bishop wrote.

She further asserted that there is "absolutely no evidence" to support the claim that a promise was made, noting that the written plea agreement itself did not contain a firearms condition.

The Second Amendment argument

In his final counter-argument, Detch pivoted to the constitutional significance of the case. He argued that

the right to bear arms is a fundamental protection that cannot be waived lightly.

"Today the constitutional right to bear arms and to maintain and protect your home with firearms is in most quarters a constitutional right, which if it's going to be waived by the defendant should be knowingly and intelligently waived," Detch wrote.

Detch contends that if the magistrate did indeed promise Camp he could keep his guns, and then that promise was revoked after the plea was entered, the plea is "self-evidently" invalid.

He is asking the Supreme Court to vacate the plea and return the case to the Greenbrier County Magistrate Court, restoring both the State and the petitioner to the positions they held before the deal was struck.

The Supreme Court's decision might hinge on whether the justices believe a "court of record" is necessary to protect the constitutional rights of defendants in West Virginia's busiest lower courts.

The justices scheduled the case for Rule 19 arguments the morning of Wednesday, April 22.

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WEST VIRGINIA Coal Association

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Coal companies honored for safety, reclamation at W.Va. Mining Symposium

by Charles Young
DEPUTY MANAGING EDITOR

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Mining professionals, industry leaders and companies from across West Virginia and the surrounding region gathered March 31 through April 1 in Charleston for the annual West Virginia Mining Symposium and Coal Show, an event focused on industry trends, safety performance and environmental stewardship.

Hosted by the West Virginia Coal Association, the symposium brought together operators, engineers, regulators and vendors for a series of technical and educational sessions, along with networking opportunities and discussions centered on the future of the coal industry. The event ran in conjunction with the West Virginia Coal Show, which featured exhibits highlighting mining equipment, services and emerging technologies.

A central focus of the symposium was recognizing mining operations and companies for their commitment to safety and environmental responsibility. The West Virginia Coal Association, in partnership with the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training, presented awards for "Exemplary Mine Safety & Environmental Excellence."

"West Virginia's coal industry continues to show its resilience and commitment to excellence across the board," said Chris Hamilton, president of the West Virginia Coal Association. "It's always a proud day for us when we can recognize those who excel in safety and reclamation, showing that the best and brightest in the industry are right here in West Virginia."

See COAL, 15



West Virginia Coal Association

Chris Hamilton, president and chief executive officer of the West Virginia Coal Association, welcomes attendees to the Annual Mining Symposium and Coal Show.

West Virginia's coal industry continues to show its resilience and commitment to excellence across the board.

Chris Hamilton

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COAL

(Continued from Page 13)

Hamilton said safety remains the industry's top priority, noting that 2025 marked a record-setting year for mine safety across the state.

"Safety always has been and continues to be our top priority in the coal industry," Hamilton said. "2025 was a record setting year for industry safety and our members demonstrate the highest levels of dedication to protecting our coal miners."

Inspectors with the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training evaluated coal operations and contractors statewide to determine the winners of the Governor's Milestones of Safety Awards. WVOMHST Director Frank Foster presented the honors during the symposium.

See COAL, 17



WV Coal Association

U.S. Sen. Jim Justice addresses the crowd.



WV Coal Association

West Virginia lawmakers participate in a panel discussion.

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WV Coal Association

Catherine Jereza, assistant secretary of U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Electricity, prepares to speak during the Symposium.



West Virginia Coal Association

West Virginia Secretary of State Kris Warner delivers remarks during the Symposium.



WV Coal Association

Michael Day, CEO of Eagle Summit Resources, was among the event's featured speakers.

COAL

(Continued from Page 15)

Among the top statewide awards, the Eustace E. Frederick Award for underground coal mines was presented to Allegheny Metallurgical's Longview Mine in Region 1 and Core Natural Resources Inc.'s Beckley Pocahontas operation in Region 4. The Bart B. Lay Jr. Award for surface coal mines was awarded to Blackhawk Mining LLC's Glancy Surface Mine in Region 4 and Cleveland-Cliffs Princeton Coal's Loop Branch Surface Mine in Region 2.

In addition to the top awards, Mountaineer Guardian Awards were presented to a wide range of underground and surface mining operations across multiple regions of the state. The recognition extended to prep plants, loadouts, quarries and independent contractors, highlighting consistent safety performance across all aspects of mining operations.

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WV Coal Association

WVU economist Dr. John Deskins speaks during the Symposium.

COAL

(Continued from Page 17)

Environmental stewardship was also a major component of the awards program, with the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection selecting winners for reclamation excellence.

“This year’s reclamation award winners are proof positive that the best environmentalists out there are in the coal industry,” said Jason Bostic, vice president of the West Virginia Coal Association. “Our members display a firm commitment to environmental protection and creative, responsible reclamation in West Virginia.”

The Greenlands Award, the top honor for overall environmental performance by a coal operator, was awarded to LP Mineral LLC’s Lily Parker Mine.

Additional environmental awards recognized projects demonstrating exemplary work in areas such as drainage structure construction, haul road development, valley fills and the reclamation of both surface and underground mining operations. Winners included companies such as Alpha Metallurgical Resources, Ramaco Resources, Core Natural Resources and Cleveland-Cliffs Princeton Coal.

Organizers said the symposium serves as an important platform for sharing knowledge, recognizing achievement and reinforcing the industry’s focus on continuous improvement. Alongside the awards presentations, the event’s sessions and exhibits provided attendees with opportunities to explore new technologies, discuss regulatory developments and examine strategies for maintaining high safety and environmental standards.

Deputy Managing Editor Charles Young can be reached at 304-626-1447 or cyoung@theet.com



WV Coal Association

A central focus of the symposium was recognizing mining operations and companies for their commitment to safety and environmental responsibility. The West Virginia Coal Association, in partnership with the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and the West Virginia Office of Miners’ Health, Safety and Training, presented awards for “Exemplary Mine Safety & Environmental Excellence.”



West Virginia Coal Association

An attendee and a vendor speak on the floor of the Coal Show.



West Virginia Coal Association

The West Virginia Coal Association has been the voice of the coal industry for over 100 years, advocating for safe, responsible mining practices and supporting the communities that depend on coal.



W.Va. coal industry holds strong as demand and policy shift

by Chase Hughart
STAFF WRITER

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — Few industries resonate with the image of West Virginia like coal. For generations, miners have extracted the resource to not only fuel the nation's energy needs, but also the state's iconography.

West Virginia's coal industry remains a central pillar of the state's economy in 2026, continuing to support tens of thousands of jobs while adapting to shifting global markets, evolving energy demands and renewed political attention.

According to West Virginia Coal Association President Chris Hamilton, the industry directly employs about 14,000 miners across the state, with thousands more working in supporting roles. When factoring in transportation, supply chains and related professions, that number climbs to roughly 60,000 West Virginians whose livelihoods are tied to coal.

"It takes a whole symphony of workers," Hamilton said. "From coal handlers and preparation plant professionals to transportation — whether it be by barge, railroad or trucking — it takes a whole network to get that coal to the end user."

That workforce footprint continues to make coal one of the largest economic drivers in the state, particularly in Southern West Virginia where mining operations remain concentrated.

Beyond mining itself, the industry sustains a wide range of white-collar and technical jobs, including engineers, accountants and legal professionals. For many communities, especially in rural areas, coal remains one of the few industries capable of providing stable, high-paying employment, often with salaries well above the state average.

Over the past year, the industry has seen both progress and setbacks.

Hamilton described the most recent legislative session as "productive," noting that several mine-specific operational measures were passed. However, a key priority — reducing the severance tax on metallurgical coal — failed to advance, leaving producers at a competitive disadvantage compared to neighboring states.

"We were not able to get our proposed reduction in severance tax for metallurgical coal producers across the finish line," he said, calling the session "a little bit of a bittersweet" outcome.

That issue remains significant as global market pressures intensify. Metallurgical coal, used in steelmaking, has faced declining prices — dropping roughly 40% over the past 18 months, according to Hamilton.



West Virginia Coal Association

Increased global competition, particularly in steel production, and fluctuating demand have created headwinds for coal producers in the state.

Increased global competition, particularly in steel production, and fluctuating demand have created headwinds for producers in the state.

"There's only going to be so much metallurgical coal that leaves U.S. borders this year," he said. "We'd like to see West Virginia account for a greater portion of that."

Compounding the challenge is the competitive landscape within the United States.

States like Pennsylvania, Virginia and Alabama impose little to no severance tax on metallurgical coal, while West Virginia producers continue to operate under a higher rate.

Industry leaders argue that reducing that burden could help preserve jobs and maintain production levels at a time when margins are tightening.

Despite those challenges, rising energy demand — particularly from emerging industries — has strengthened coal's position in the broader energy landscape.

Hamilton pointed to extreme winter weather earlier this year as a reminder of coal's reliability. During prolonged cold snaps across much of the Eastern United States, he said, other energy sources struggled while coal-fired power plants continued operating steadily.

"No other base fuel for generating electricity can survive long inclement weather periods like coal can," he said. "You can keep 60 to 100 days' supply of coal on site. No other fuel is stored that way."

That reliability is becoming increasingly important as electricity demand grows, driven in part by technological expansion and industrial development.

The rapid rise of data centers — large-scale facilities that require enormous and constant amounts of electricity — is expected to significantly increase power consumption across the region in the coming years.

"These are huge, energy-gobbling facilities," Hamilton said. "We're on the verge of seeing at least one come into the state, and they're going to need a lot of power."

The anticipated arrival of data centers has become a focal point for economic development officials, who see an opportunity to position West Virginia as a critical energy supplier along the East Coast.

However, meeting that demand will require significant planning and investment, particularly in upgrading existing infrastructure and ensuring sufficient generation capacity.

West Virginia's energy sector is also becoming more diverse, with natural gas continuing to expand alongside coal. While some view the industries as competitors, Hamilton emphasized the importance of coexistence and a balanced approach to energy production.

"There's a place for both," he said. "Where it becomes contentious is when one tries to displace the other. There's no real benefit in trading one energy job for another."

State leaders have increasingly promoted an "all-of-the-above" energy strategy, aiming to leverage both coal and natural gas resources while maintaining grid reliability and affordability.

Central to that strategy is modernizing the state's existing coal-fired power plants. Industry advocates argue that

targeted upgrades could significantly improve efficiency, extend operational life and help stabilize electricity costs for consumers.

"Our coal plants are only running at about half capacity today," Hamilton said. "If we increase that capacity and make the necessary upgrades, they can run 24/7 for decades to come."

Such upgrades are also seen as essential to meeting future demand without over-reliance on intermittent energy sources. Coal's ability to provide consistent base-load power remains one of its primary advantages, particularly as utilities and policymakers grapple with how to ensure reliability during periods of peak demand or extreme weather.

West Virginia already exports a significant portion of the electricity it generates, positioning it as a key player in the regional grid. Along with neighboring Pennsylvania, it is one of the few states east of the Mississippi River that produces more power than it consumes. That dynamic has long made the state an energy exporter, supplying electricity to surrounding regions.

"We're exporting almost half the power we generate," Hamilton said. "With growing demand, especially from neighboring states and data centers, we have the opportunity to expand that role."

Looking ahead, industry leaders see both opportunity and uncertainty. Federal policy has shifted in a direction more favorable to coal, with increased attention on supporting domestic energy production and infrastructure.

At the same time, global market volatility and competition continue to shape the outlook for certain segments of the industry, particularly metallurgical coal.

For Hamilton, one priority stands above the rest in the near term: Improving competitiveness for West Virginia's producers, especially through policy changes like reducing the severance tax.

"We've got to reduce costs on our producers to keep them competitive with other states," he said. "The return is keeping thousands of miners working in high-paying jobs and maintaining a strong production base."

As West Virginia navigates an evolving energy landscape, coal continues to play a foundational role — not only as a source of power, but as a cornerstone of the state's economy, workforce and identity.

While the industry faces ongoing challenges, its combination of economic impact, reliability and adaptability ensures it will remain a defining force in the state for years to come.

From classroom to campus leadership: Wendland's journey to WVU Provost

QUICK TAKE:

■ New leadership with national pedigree: Beverly Wendland, a longtime Johns Hopkins University leader and former provost at Washington University in St. Louis, will take over as provost at West Virginia University on July 1.

■ Sees WVU as a "hidden gem": Wendland says she was drawn to WVU's land-grant mission and untapped national profile, aiming to elevate its research, academic programs and statewide impact.

■ Early focus: listening and trust-building: She plans to spend her first months learning the institution and strengthening public confidence in higher education while advancing WVU's strategic goals and research strengths.

by John Mark Shaver
FAIRMONT NEWS EDITOR

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — Starting July 1, Dr. Beverly Wendland will take over as West Virginia University's provost and vice president of academic affairs, a position she believes will allow her to help the university capitalize on its potential and accelerate learning opportunities for people across the Mountain State.



Wendland

Originally from California, Wendland got her undergraduate degree in bioengineering from University of California, San Diego, before attaining a Ph.D. in neurosciences at Stanford University. As a child, though, she was a "voracious" reader who often played teacher with her stuffed animals, setting Wendland up, she believes, for a lifelong love of academics.

"I've always loved learning, and I was always a good student," she said. "When I went to college, I had the opportunity to do work in a research lab down at the medical school, and that's what got me going in the science direction. It all bloomed from there."

Wendland became a faculty member at Johns Hopkins University in 1998 and served as the school's Department of Biology chair from 2009 to 2014. She then became the James B. Knapp dean of the Krieger School of Arts at Johns Hopkins.

"I gradually rose through the ranks," Wendland said. "Initially, a lot of it was

leadership vacuums that I found myself (filling). ... In (the Department of Biology chair) position, I started to get more visibility into activities across the whole school of arts and sciences and the university. When I became interim dean, that's really where I found myself administratively. ...

"I began to appreciate the complexity, the breadth, the scope and the magnitude of what a complex organization like an arts and sciences school is, and all of the possibilities it represents. It was so exciting to be in the position where I could see all of the pieces and see how they come together. I enjoyed those collaborations and finding those opportunities to pull things together to create new programs and hiring opportunities."

After 22 years at Johns Hopkins, Wendland served as provost and executive vice chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis for five years before becoming the senior advisor to the chancellor.

While getting involved in higher education administration wasn't her goal from the beginning, Wendland said her career naturally evolved as she took on more responsibility and leadership duties.

She said West Virginia University struck her as a "hidden gem," and she applied for the provost position in Morgantown because she wants to help platform the institution in any way she can.

"There is so much extraordinary work that is happening at this university, and it deserves a bigger spotlight," she said. "What pulled me in was the combination of ambition and mission, the chance to serve students across West Virginia and pursuing the push toward national excellence for the university as a whole. For me, it's about impact. Public universities like WVU change lives, and this felt like an opportunity for me to be part of that in a very real way."

Wendland said that learning is core to West Virginia University's mission, a trait that she believes aligns perfectly with her fundamental ideals. Because of this, she is deeply grateful for the chance to be part of WVU's administration going forward.

"I could not be more excited about coming to WVU," Wendland said. "There are so many opportunities to be of service at an institution that really brings the land-grant mission to life. I'm a first-genera-



WVU Photo/Brian Persinger

Incoming WVU Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Beverly Wendland talks with University President Michael T. Benson during a welcome reception in January at Blaney House in Morgantown.

tion college student, and that means a lot to me. I look forward to the opportunity of bringing my own experiences as a first-gen college student and the awareness that it gives me to some of the challenges our students are likely facing. ...

"I know that many of them have it much worse than I had it, but I believe in the transformative effect of education on lives. My own life is one palpable example. ... It's not work for me. It's my passion. I never say that I'm going to work. I say that I'm going to school. The opportunity to support and elevate the academic mission of the university (is amazing)."

In a January press release announcing Wendland's hire, West Virginia University President Michael Benson shared his excitement over her arrival, noting that bringing the new provost to WVU is "the most important hiring decision he will make."

"Beverly is a nationally recognized cell biologist who has served as a faculty member, department chair, dean and provost during her extensive career, which has also included direct work with large academic medical centers," Benson said. "She will bring a scientific mindset to the role of provost and vice president for academic affairs that will complement my work as a historian. This balance will ensure all academic disciplines — from STEM to the arts — are prioritized at the highest levels of leadership as we drive the academic mission of West

Virginia University into a new and impactful era."

WVU associate provost for undergraduate education and co-chair of the WVU Provost Search Committee Evan Widwers shared Benson's sentiment.

"Beverly Wendland is a distinguished scholar and accomplished administrator. Her deep knowledge of student success and academic teaching, service and research will be invaluable in leading academic affairs at WVU into the future. The Office of the Provost looks forward to building on her leadership, energy and vision as the university adapts to the ever-changing landscape of higher education."

WVU Provost Search Committee co-chair Diana Davis, who is an associate professor and former Faculty Senate chair, also shared her anticipation of Wendland's arrival.

"Dr. Wendland's vast experience as both a faculty member and academic administrator positions her well to understand the challenges and opportunities for faculty members at West Virginia University," Davis said. "Her willingness to engage with faculty and meet them where they are to move forward will be invaluable."

When Wendland begins serving in her new position in July, she hopes to capitalize on the university's many opportunities in the academic and research fields.

See WVU, 30



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Maternity care access 'plummets' in state

QUICK TAKE:

■ Rural hospitals are increasingly shuttering their labor and delivery units due to staffing shortages and financial pressures, forcing expectant mothers to travel longer distances for care.

■ While a Certificate of Need is required to open a service, no current state regulations prevent a facility from abruptly stopping delivery services, leading to calls for better notification and support systems.

■ To bridge the gap in care, medical professionals are advocating for increased telemedicine use, community feedback boards and prenatal grants to maintain local health resources.

by Noah Jeffries
STAFF WRITER

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — Birth and delivery rates have been declining in West Virginia for several years, leading to a shrinking map of available maternity care.

Last month, Vandalia Health Mon Stonewall Jackson Memorial Hospital in Lewis County announced that it will no longer be offering obstetrics delivery services.

This is just the latest example of a statewide trend, said Kimberly Farry, an OB-GYN physician with the WVU Department of OB-GYN based at St. Joseph's Hospital in Buckhannon.

"The number of delivery facilities in my career has just plummeted over time," she said. "It's a horrendously terrible change."

Multiple factors have been driving the closures, Farry said.

"For some places, it's the lack of the ability to get the appropriate number of physicians and care providers to help run the units," she said. "I think for some it's also financial."

Labor and delivery units often struggle to remain profitable, but they serve a vital role in the broader health care ecosystem, Farry said.

"Typically, labor and delivery units are not a big money maker for any facility," she said. "But we think of the labor and delivery unit as the gateway



Farry



Adobe Stock photo

When a rural hospital stops offering delivery services, expectant mothers are left with very limited options.

to bring the whole family to that facility. A lot of times you need to have the birthing facility in order for other services to be adequately filled for people."

While the downward trend is expected to continue, there has been recent discussion regarding legislative intervention, Farry said.

"I think there is some talk about this at the state level," she said. "It's interesting that you have to get a certificate of need to open a service, but there is nothing preventing a facility from stopping a service. They can simply decide to do that. Having a notification system with an effort toward supporting that service is something I think is being evaluated."

When a rural hospital stops offering delivery services, expectant mothers are left with very limited options, Farry said.

"In terms of the actual delivery, there are really only two choices," she said. "You either have to drive some-

where further away to deliver or you have a home birth with a midwife supporting you at home."

Medical professionals warn against the risks of going through labor without professional assistance, Farry said.

"We really don't encourage an unintended birth where you are birthing at home by yourself," she said. "That can be really dangerous."

However, different options for prenatal care are still available, Farry said.

"We just finished up a very large grant called RMOMS (Rural Maternity and Obstetrics Management Strategies)," she said. "What we tried to do is create the ability to have services for women during their prenatal care so they can get care right in their community."

At a local level, St. Joseph's Hospital is finding new ways to listen to community input, Farry said.

"We've started a community board to talk about services with our commu-

nity to get feedback about what people think is important in their facilities," she said. "I think more of that needs to happen to create that avenue of communication."

Promoting telemedicine is another key strategy for reaching underserved areas, Farry said.

"As things like this are happening in our state, the important thing is to try and utilize more of our telemedicine abilities so we can still meet with patients in their own community and make sure they have the right resources."

Educating residents can sometimes be a hurdle, especially for people facing logistical barriers, Farry said.

"Patients sometimes feel they don't have access to care, so they simply just don't come because they don't know how else to engage with the medical system if they don't have transportation," she said. "I think it would be helpful if there was more knowledge about things like telemedicine."

Top W.Va. Banks by Market Share

Source: Information taken from the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation's annual Deposit Market Share Report, listing deposits as of June 30, 2025, the most recent year for which data is available.

INSTITUTION	W.Va. Offices	W.Va. Deposits (\$000)	Market Share	INSTITUTION	W.Va. Offices	W.Va. Deposits (\$000)	Market Share
UNITED BANK	48	6,853,508	14.55%	PNC BANK, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION	2	233,452	0.50%
TRUIST BANK	42	5,916,021	12.56%	FNB BANK, INC.	6	225,611	0.48%
WESBANCO BANK, INC.	38	4,308,216	9.15%	THE BANK OF MONROE	3	215,273	0.46%
CITY NATIONAL BANK OF WEST VIRGINIA	58	3,458,316	7.34%	WILLIAMSTOWN BANK, INC.	4	202,798	0.43%
MVB BANK, INC	6	2,617,134	5.56%	BCBANK, INC.	5	200,679	0.43%
THE HUNTINGTON NATIONAL BANK	26	2,616,744	5.56%	FIRST-CITIZENS BANK & TRUST COMPANY	4	186,390	0.40%
BURKE & HERBERT BANK & TRUST COMPANY	32	2,300,599	4.88%	DAVIS TRUST COMPANY	2	185,120	0.39%
JPMORGAN CHASE BANK, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION	17	2,293,781	4.87%	FREEDOM BANK, INC.	5	184,498	0.39%
PEOPLES BANK	26	1,512,931	3.21%	CALHOUN COUNTY BANK, INC.	4	180,139	0.38%
FIRST COMMUNITY BANK	21	1,073,228	2.28%	MOUNTAIN VALLEY BANK, N.A.	4	174,600	0.37%
CLEAR MOUNTAIN BANK	10	785,785	1.67%	PIONEER COMMUNITY BANK, INC.	6	157,079	0.33%
CITIZENS BANK OF WEST VIRGINIA, INC.	6	601,810	1.28%	CAPON VALLEY BANK	3	154,097	0.33%
PUTNAM COUNTY BANK	5	583,833	1.24%	FIRST NEIGHBORHOOD BANK	5	146,460	0.31%
THE POCA VALLEY BANK, INC.	8	578,250	1.23%	THE HARRISON COUNTY BANK	4	138,557	0.29%
BANK OF CHARLES TOWN	5	534,791	1.14%	THE FAYETTE COUNTY NATIONAL BANK OF FAYETTEVILLE	3	135,560	0.29%
MAIN STREET BANK CORP.	4	523,241	1.11%	WHITESVILLE STATE BANK	5	124,493	0.26%
JEFFERSON SECURITY BANK	5	497,235	1.06%	GUARANTY BANK INC.	3	117,677	0.25%
PENDLETON COMMUNITY BANK, INC.	8	476,998	1.01%	CLAY COUNTY BANK, INC.	2	113,122	0.24%
CNB BANK, INC.	5	432,740	0.92%	THE FARMERS BANK AND SAVINGS COMPANY	3	112,834	0.24%
FIRST UNITED BANK & TRUST	8	431,301	0.92%	NEW PEOPLES BANK, INC.	2	87,884	0.19%
HUNTINGTON FEDERAL SAVINGS BANK	5	430,680	0.91%	MANUFACTURERS AND TRADERS TRUST COMPANY	2	84,345	0.18%
HANCOCK COUNTY SAVINGS BANK, F.S.B.	3	384,899	0.82%	FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF PENNSYLVANIA	2	83,257	0.18%
UNION BANK, INC.	8	365,906	0.78%	THE FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF WILLIAMSON	2	80,811	0.17%
COMMUNITY TRUST BANK, INC.	6	348,433	0.74%	THE PLEASANTS COUNTY BANK	2	69,213	0.15%
FIRST EXCHANGE BANK	7	343,016	0.73%	THE FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF PETERSTOWN	1	67,243	0.14%
FIFTH THIRD BANK, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION	5	338,520	0.72%	FIRST MUTUAL BANK, FSB	2	56,642	0.12%
LOGAN BANK & TRUST COMPANY	6	326,956	0.69%	MINERS & MERCHANTS BANK	2	51,491	0.11%
THE GRANT COUNTY BANK	7	324,883	0.69%	WOODFOREST NATIONAL BANK	9	43,264	0.09%
THE OHIO VALLEY BANK COMPANY	5	305,730	0.65%	CITIZENS BANK OF MORGANTOWN, INC.	1	42,295	0.09%
MCNB BANK AND TRUST CO.	6	291,556	0.62%	FIRST GUARANTY BANK	1	35,917	0.08%
WEST UNION BANK	5	266,789	0.57%	UNIFIED BANK	1	25,512	0.05%
COMMUNITY BANK	3	262,063	0.56%	FIRST FEDERAL SAVINGS & LOAN ASSOCIATION OF RAVENSWOOD	1	22,920	0.05%
THE BANK OF ROMNEY	7	261,057	0.55%	FIRST SENTINEL BANK	1	14,185	0.03%
THE CITIZENS BANK OF WESTON	2	251,506	0.53%	HOME NATIONAL BANK	1	957	0.00%
COMMUNITY BANK OF PARKERSBURG	4	244,241	0.52%				

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Preston County continues opposition to transmission line project

QUICK TAKE:

■ NextEra Energy filed applications for the Mid-Atlantic Resiliency Link, a 107.5-mile transmission line traversing Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland, and Virginia to bolster grid reliability.

■ Preston County and neighboring West Virginia commissions filed for intervenor status, formally opposing the project due to a perceived lack of local benefits.

■ Residents and officials argue the “flyover” project prioritizes out-of-state data centers while threatening land values, multi-generational farms, and local electricity rates.

by Jacob Martin
STAFF WRITER

KINGWOOD, W.Va. — Preston County continues to stand in opposition to NextEra Energy’s Mid-Atlantic Resiliency Link project, with persistent protest from the community and formal actions from the Preston County Commission, which most recently filed for intervenor status.

The Mid-Atlantic Resiliency Link (MARL) is an approximately 107.5-mile, 500-kilovolt (kV) transmission line and 500/138-kV substation. PJM Interconnection identified the project as critical to strengthening the reliability of the local electric grid across the region, according to NextEra officials.

The project aims to create a new transmission line from Greene County, Pennsylvania, to a connection point in Frederick County, Virginia. The current established route would pass through parts of West Virginia, including Preston, Monongalia, Mineral and Hampshire counties. Additionally, the project would pass through Garrett and Allegany counties in Maryland, officials said.

NextEra officials have said the project is needed for reliability, with the end goal to provide dependable electricity throughout the region and strengthen the power grid based on research from PJM Interconnection LLC.

PJM issued a request for proposals in 2023 to address the expected retirement of an additional 11 gigawatts of power plants in the region, as well as an increase of 7 gigawatts in demand — a mismatch that requires new infrastructure, officials said.

On Friday, Jan. 30, NextEra Energy



The proposed corridor for the Mid-Atlantic Resiliency Link (MARL) transmission line.

officials moved forward with their timeline for building the Mid-Atlantic Resiliency Link by filing applications with the West Virginia and Maryland Public Service Commissions (PSC). These are the first two out of four states where the company must file.

Following the filing with the West Virginia PSC, the Preston County Commission’s stance remained unchanged.

Commission President Hunter Thomas said the filing came as no surprise. He added that the project’s “preferred route” would cut through the northern section of Preston County, given its viability as identified by NextEra Energy.

“I remain committed to standing with our residents who have voiced many concerns with the project. And right now, I still see no clear benefit to Preston County that matches the scale of what our community is being asked to sacrifice,” Thomas said.

Other county commissions, including in Monongalia, Mineral and Hampshire, all unanimously approved formal oppositions to the project in 2025.

County authorities also looked to create a united voice for those affected by the project, including Preston, Monongalia, Hampshire and Mineral. The idea was originally proposed by the Hampshire County Commission, officials said.

In early March, the Preston County Commission took formal action to further oppose the MARL project. Commissioners unanimously approved a petition for leave to intervene in the Public Service Commission’s case to join state-level proceedings — an action also taken by the Monongalia, Hampshire and Mineral County commissions.

Currently, the PSC has officially granted intervenor status to Preston, Monongalia and Hampshire counties, while Mineral County’s request remains under review, officials said.

Despite NextEra’s efforts to convince the public of the MARL project’s merits, community members remain opposed. Many have taken action, calling for local and state leaders to intervene on behalf of local landowners who share concerns that the project will impact land values, the natural beauty of the state, and multi-generational farms.

Residents also fear the project will undermine the tourism economy, increase electricity rates and demonstrate a blatant disregard for the citizens of the state. Many cite issues that the power demand is specifically needed to support the growth of data centers in Northern Virginia, officials said.

Many have stated that the project would be more acceptable if it directly benefited West Virginians with jobs from the project’s development or growth from the creation of a local site. However, the public has labeled MARL a “flyover” with no direct benefit to West Virginia consumers.

West Virginians Against Transmission Injustice, a group on the forefront of public opposition to the project, reported that in January the West Virginia PSC had received 3,717 letters of protest opposing the MARL project, and not a single letter of support.

Beth Ann Bassio, a Preston County resident and farmer, encouraged the commission to move forward with the



Staff photo by Jacob Martin

Preston County Commission President Hunter Thomas remains committed to standing with county residents who have voiced many concerns with the project.

petition process during a recent meeting.

“The Preston County Commission was also one of the first to speak out against this unfair project and submit a letter to the Public Service Commission, and I will forever be thankful for that leadership,” Bassio said.

Bassio added that intervention is important because of the potential impact the MARL project could have on property values in Preston County, which may ultimately affect the county’s tax base.

“It has been said that the MARL project represents a clear overreach that prioritizes out-of-state interests over the livelihoods and values of West Virginians,” she said. “We should not be forced to subsidize data centers in Northern Virginia at the expense of our farmers, families and natural beauty. We will pay for this in our power bills. Why should West Virginians bear the burden of this project for states that are choosing to shut down their own generation while their economies continue to boom?”

Currently, Preston County commissioners are reviewing all legal options for their intervenor status. They are looking to hire a lawyer to represent them in the official PSC proceedings.

Preston County Commissioner Don Smith recommended that the commission consult the other counties about having one lawyer or legal firm represent all of them.

Why WV shouldn't pay for NextEra power play

West Virginia is no stranger to being an “energy sacrifice zone,” but the latest proposal from NextEra Energy — the Mid-Atlantic Resiliency Link (MARL) — takes this exploitation to a new level.

As NextEra officials recently filed siting applications with the West Virginia and Maryland Public Service Commissions, the project is officially moving forward. However, a closer look at the “pros and cons” reveals a lopsided deal that leaves West Virginia ratepayers holding the bag for a project that offers them minimal benefit while threatening the state’s natural heritage and booming tourism economy.

The primary argument for the MARL project is, as its name suggests, “resiliency.” NextEra claims the new transmission line will strengthen the regional grid, helping to prevent blackouts and improve overall reliability.

From a macro-level grid perspective,

adding high-voltage capacity can indeed help move power more efficiently during peak demand or emergencies. For the developers and their shareholders, the project is a guaranteed win, backed by federally mandated returns on investment for transmission infrastructure.

For the average West Virginian, however, the “pros” are far outweighed by significant drawbacks:

1. Footing the bill for someone else’s power: The most glaring issue is the cost. Transmission projects of this scale run into the hundreds of millions, and these costs are ultimately passed down to ratepayers. Yet, the MARL project is designed primarily to move power through West Virginia to high-demand centers on the East Coast. West Virginia ratepayers shouldn’t have to foot the bill for a power line project that provides minimal benefit to state residents. Our state already maintains an electricity

surplus, yet our rates continue to rise; this project only exacerbates that trend while serving out-of-state interests.

2. Scaring away the “Almost Heaven” economy: West Virginia’s tourism industry is a record-breaking success, recently hitting a \$9.1 billion impact with over 77 million visitors. People come here for our “pristine wilderness,” not for views of massive steel towers and high-voltage wires cutting through the canopy. Why does this line have to go through some of our state’s most pristine wilderness and high-tourism areas? From the Cheat River Gorge to the Potomac Highlands, we are risking the very “Wild and Wonderful” brand that drives our local economies.

3. Minimal job creation: While NextEra may tout “construction jobs,” these are temporary and often filled by specialized out-of-state crews. Once the line is built, it requires almost no local

personnel to maintain, leaving West Virginia with the environmental scars and the debt, but none of the long-term economic prosperity.

West Virginia must demand a more equitable approach to regional energy projects. If our land is to be used for the benefit of the Mid-Atlantic grid, the financial burden must fall on the high-demand states receiving the power — not on West Virginia families who are already struggling with skyrocketing energy costs.

The Public Service Commission has a duty to protect West Virginians. They must ask the hard questions: Is this line truly necessary for our reliability, or is it simply a shortcut for NextEra’s profits? Until the benefits to West Virginia are clear and the costs are fairly distributed, the Mid-Atlantic Resiliency Link remains a bad deal for the Mountain State.

The gravity of agentic AI: Why AI data centers are the new business magnets



James L.
ESTEP

In the previous century, the proximity of a business to physical infrastructure — railroads, deep-water ports, or interstate highways — determined its competitive viability.

Today, a new form of “industrial gravity” is emerging. As artificial intelligence (AI) transitions from passive chat interfac-

es to autonomous agentic AI systems, a new kind of AI that doesn’t just answer questions, but can take actions, make decisions, and complete multi-step tasks on its own is coming to be. The data centers housing these models and data are becoming the most powerful economic magnets of the modern era. AI data centers will not merely exist as remote utilities; they will attract entire ecosystems of businesses desperate to shorten the physical distance between their operations and the compute that powers them.

The primary driver of this shift is something most people never think about, time delay, or what technologists call “latency.” In systems that rely

on AI making dozens of decisions in sequence, even tiny delays, fractions of a second, can quickly add up. What feels instantaneous to a person can become sluggish and inefficient for a business relying on real-time automation.

In the burgeoning era of agentic AI, “low latency” has evolved from a technical preference to a functional requirement. Unlike standard generative AI, which might produce a single static response, agentic AI operates through continuous feedback loops. These agents observe an environment, reason through a multi-step plan, call upon external tools via APIs, and then adjust their actions based on real-time results.

Every single step in this “reasoning-action” loop introduces a delay. When an AI agent must perform dozens of sequential operations to complete a complex task, such as managing a high-frequency supply chain adjustment or executing an automated real-time cyber-defense, even a few milliseconds of network transit time can compound into seconds of “thinking” time. For a business, these seconds represent the difference between a fluid, autonomous operation and a “brittle” system that stalls, errors out, or loses its competitive edge. Consequently, enterprises are realizing that to make AI

agents economically and operationally viable, they must minimize the physical “round-trip” of data by co-locating near the source of compute.

Furthermore, the physical proximity to AI data centers creates what economists call an “Innovation Proximity Effect.” When a region becomes a hub for massive compute power, it naturally attracts a specialized workforce and a cluster of supporting industries. Businesses moving into these “AI Corridors” gain more than just a faster fiber-optic connection; they gain access to a localized ecosystem of AI infrastructure engineers, specialized hardware vendors, and collaborative partners. This clustering effect mirrors the rise of Silicon Valley or the financial districts of London and New York, where being “in the room” (or on the same local area network) accelerates the velocity of innovation.

Moreover, the sheer resource requirements of modern AI, especially power, are forcing a shift in corporate real estate strategy. AI data centers are increasingly being treated as critical infrastructure, akin to power plants. Forward-thinking companies are moving their primary operational hubs to regions where the grid is specifically reinforced to support high-density

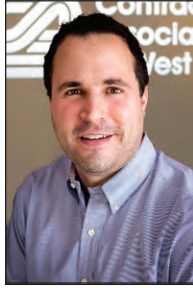
AI workloads. By being geographically close to these hubs, businesses can tap into “sovereign” or localized cloud zones that ensure data privacy and regulatory compliance without sacrificing the high-speed throughput required for agentic autonomy.

The map of global commerce is being redrawn around the compute of data centers. As businesses integrate autonomous agents into the core of their workflows, the speed of light, and the physical distance it must travel, becomes a hard ceiling on performance. The data center is no longer a “black box” in a distant desert; it is the new “port.” To thrive in an agentic AI economy, businesses will find themselves following the gravity of agentic AI, setting up shop where the compute is heaviest and the latency is lowest.

The “gravity of agentic AI” is perhaps the most lucrative opportunity the state of West Virginia has ever seen. The state is uniquely positioned with enormous natural gas and new microgrid legislation to become the “center of gravity” for the agentic AI revolution fundamentally transforming the economy of Central Appalachia.

James L. Estep has served as president and chief executive officer of the High Technology Foundation since June of 2000.

Don't trade West Virginia's roads for short-term political gain



**Jason
PIZATELLA**

Now that the regular legislative session is behind us, the attention has quickly shifted to warmer weather and, perhaps more importantly, the upcoming primary election on May 12. Typically in an election year, those candidates on the ballot spend considerable time analyzing and debating

what the Legislature did and didn't do. From the construction industry's perspective, what a productive session it was.

One example was \$125 million in new funds and \$100 million in expanded spending authority for existing funds so that the West Virginia Division of Highways (WVDOH) and its contractor partners can tackle new highway paving projects across the state. Another proposal authorized up to \$150 million in future improvements to the Culture Center, one of the most iconic facilities on the State Capitol Complex. The Legislature also appropriated over \$30

million in additional funds above and beyond the usual allocation for water and wastewater projects statewide. All three of these initiatives passed with overwhelming bipartisan support.

This does not even consider the recent gains through the construction of new travel plazas on the West Virginia Turnpike, new schools and sports facilities, new manufacturing facilities in Mason and Putnam Counties, new office buildings in downtown Charleston, and a new shopping center in South Charleston. The wins keep coming. Election years, however, also tend to include certain proposals that arguably yield short-term political gain without taking into consideration the devastating future consequences. One such proposal that's being floated around is to temporarily suspend the state's motor fuel excise tax, also known as "the gas tax."

At first glance, the idea of suspending the gas tax sounds appealing. Families are feeling the strain of higher prices, the ongoing war in Iran has caused uncertainty in the oil and petroleum markets, and lawmakers feel pressure to respond. But as proposals circulate from members of both the

Freedom Caucus on the right and Democratic legislators on the left to temporarily pause this tax, we must take a step back and consider the long-term consequences of such a decision.

Quite simply, suspending the gas tax is a short-term fix that creates long-term problems. The motor fuel excise tax is not just another line item on a receipt — it is the primary funding source for the State Road Fund. That fund is what keeps West Virginia's highways paved, its bridges safe, and its infrastructure resilient in the face of harsh weather and challenging terrain. Every mile of asphalt laid, every bridge repaired or replaced, and every slip or slide stabilized depends on consistent, reliable funding.

Suspending this revenue stream, even "temporarily," would mean immediate and significant cuts to the very projects that keep our transportation system functioning. Even a one-month pause would blow a hole in the WVDOH budget that it would take years to recover from. Now is not the time to go backwards with the State Road Fund.

West Virginia's geography makes road maintenance more complex and

more expensive than in many other states. Contractors like the ones I represent work year-round to address not only routine wear and tear, but also landslides, erosion, and structural deterioration. These projects are not optional — they are essential to public safety. Not to mention the thousands of jobs they create, sustain, and support.

When funding goes down, projects are delayed. When projects get delayed, costs increase. And when costs increase, taxpayers ultimately pay more — not less. Proponents of the gas tax suspension argue that it would provide immediate financial relief to consumers. But any savings at the pump would likely be modest. Meanwhile, the consequences of reduced infrastructure investment would be far-reaching and enduring. Poor road conditions lead to higher vehicle repair costs, longer travel times, and increased safety risks. Businesses that rely on efficient transportation networks — from trucking companies to local suppliers — would also feel the impact.

See PIZATELLA, 31

Coal remains the backbone of West Virginia — and a pillar of national strength



**Chris
HAMILTON**

Coal has long been the backbone of West Virginia's economy, the bedrock of our energy system, and a symbol of the strength and resolve of the American worker. While critics continue to write off coal as a relic of the past, the truth is that coal remains as vital today as it ever

was — powering homes, businesses, manufacturing plants, and the very economy that fuels our daily lives.

West Virginia's economy is deeply tied to coal. It sustains tens of thousands of direct jobs and even more through the broader supply chain — railroads, equipment manufacturers, construction contractors, and local service providers. In many of our communities, coal isn't just one in-

dustry among many — it is the local economy. It provides family-sustaining wages, healthcare benefits, and retirement security to thousands of men and women across our state.

In West Virginia alone, coal contributed over \$21 billion in total economic impact to West Virginia. It accounted for more than 43,000 jobs when combining direct and indirect employment, and it supported over \$3 billion in wages and salaries. Severance taxes from coal help fund our public schools, infrastructure projects, and first responders. This industry doesn't just employ — it invests back into the state in a real, tangible way.

And the economic importance of coal goes far beyond West Virginia's borders.

Across the country, coal provides nearly 20% of America's electricity, offering a level of reliability, affordability, and energy security that intermittent sources like wind and

solar simply cannot match on their own. When demand spikes during the coldest winters and the hottest summers, it's coal-fired power plants that prevent blackouts and keep American homes warm and businesses running.

Coal is also a critical element of our industrial base. Metallurgical coal, mined right here in West Virginia, is essential for steelmaking — a process that cannot currently be replaced by any renewable technology. That steel, in turn, is used in the construction of bridges, buildings, automobiles, pipelines, and defense infrastructure. Without coal, America's manufacturing and construction sectors would grind to a halt. More than 72 percent of all domestic steel mills rely on West Virginia metallurgical coal to fuel their furnaces.

At a time when geopolitical tensions are rising and energy costs are surging, our nation needs to re-center its priorities around domestic en-

ergy production. That includes a renewed focus on coal — not just as a legacy resource, but as a strategic asset for the future.

Coal provides a level of energy sovereignty that insulates us from international supply chain disruptions and price shocks. It is stored on-site, mined on American soil, and controlled by American companies — not foreign governments. That's not just good economics; that's national security.

In West Virginia, we are proud of the role we play in powering the country and driving economic growth. But we also recognize that coal's future depends on leadership — at every level. We need policies that support responsible production, encourage investment in advanced coal technologies, and maintain a balanced energy mix that values reliability and resilience.

See HAMILTON, 30

NORTH

MOUNDSVILLE

In preparation for the next school year, Marshall County Board of education members approved several personnel matters this week including reductions in force.

The board's agenda listed 17 different people whose employment was recommended for termination by reduction in force by Superintendent Shelby Haines.

In a previous report, Haines talked about the district's declining enrollment, something that 50 out of 55 counties in the state are experiencing. Each year at this time the district goes through its reduction in force and hiring process. The number of teachers and aides is based on the number of students. The district is permitted to add employees throughout the year, but can only do RIFs before a new school year begins.

As part of the RIF process, employees are entitled to a hearing with the board to dispute the proposed action. None decided to have a hearing.

— The Intelligencer/ Wheeling News-Register

WELLSBURG

Brooke County officials are hoping to get discussions on the possible distribution of county opioid settlement funds back on track after several months of delays.

A series of requests for the county's share of opioid funds, derived from settlement agreements connected to various lawsuits filed by the state against manufacturers and distributors of pharmaceutical opioids, has been tabled in recent months as commissioners and others could not reach a consensus on how to address the issue.

"We will address it," Commissioner Christina White said during Tuesday's commission meeting.

White was recently appointed to the commission following the resignation of A.J. Thomas.

Both White and Commissioner Stacey Wise indicated there will be workshops, which will be open to the public, scheduled to offer detailed discussion on the funding available, the requests already made for the county's funds and methods of distribution.

Dates and times for those work sessions will be announced later.

According to Tuesday's agenda, the county has nine requests for the funds, all of which have remained tabled in recent months as commissioners have been unable to agree on how to award funding.

— The Intelligencer/ Wheeling News-Register



ACROSS THE STATE

NORTH CENTRAL

KINGWOOD

During a recent meeting, Kingwood City Council members addressed residents' concerns and discussed the necessity of a written agreement before issuing a business license for a towing service.

Council members also reviewed four sealed bids and bonds for an upcoming round of city paving projects encompassing eight streets. The bids submitted were from Parrotta Paving, Anderson Excavating LLC, Stone Paving, and Wolfe's Excavating.

The total price points reviewed by council included:

- Parrotta — \$151,900
- Anderson — \$156,934
- Stone — \$212,946
- Wolfe's — \$266,757

Council members took additional time at the end of the meeting to review the bidders' qualifications and bonds to ensure they met project specifications. Ultimately, council members selected and approved the low bid from Parrotta.

Meanwhile, council members reviewed a city business license for Rankin Towing at 314 Morgantown St. — formerly the location of Bubbas Tire. The review followed concerns from the community and council regarding the potential development of the property's lower lot for car storage.

Mayor Jean Guillot asked about the intended plan for the former Bubbas location and raised concerns specifically about the lower lot.

— Preston County News and Journal

Tourism in North Central West Virginia continued to grow in 2025, according to the latest annual report from the Visit Mountaineer Country Convention and Visitors Bureau, with officials pointing to collaboration, niche development and sustained marketing efforts as key drivers of success.

Susan Riddle, the bureau's president and CEO, said the region's approach has long required a different mindset than more traditional vacation destinations.

"2025 was another successful year for tourism in North Central West Virginia," Riddle said. "We've known for years that nobody wakes up in the morning and says, 'Hey, I'm going to North Central West Virginia on vacation.' So we have to be different, work harder and be creative."



That strategy translated into tangible results. More than \$1.8 million in lodging tax revenue came through the organization in 2025 alone, with regional totals expected to surpass \$3 million when combined with other convention and visitors bureaus.

Riddle credited those gains to strong partnerships across the region.

"Relationships are our superpower," she said. "We are only able to do what we do based on the relationships that we have."

— The Morgantown News

EAST

MARTINSBURG

Former West Virginia University President E. Gordon Gee was recognized April 14 as the Shenandoah Area Council's Distinguished Citizen during a dinner ceremony celebrating leadership, service and the values of scouting. The event, held at the Holiday Inn in Martinsburg, brought together community leaders, scouts and supporters to honor Gee as the award's 31st recipient.

The annual Distinguished Citizen Award, presented by the Potomac District of the Shenandoah Area Council, recognizes individuals who exemplify the ideals of scouting through professional achievement, community service and dedication to youth. Organizers previously shared that Gee's lifelong commitment to those principles, along with his influence in higher education and beyond, made him a standout choice for this year's honor.

Throughout the evening, speakers reflected on Gee's leadership, resilience and ability to connect with people. Rick Pill, who served as master of ceremonies and previously spent seven years on the WVU Board of Governors, including a term as chairman, highlighted the challenges Gee faced during his presidency. Among those was the COVID-19 pandemic. Pill credited him with navigating those obstacles while strengthening the university.

— The Journal

SHEPHERDSTOWN

The Bavarian Inn once again played host to the Jefferson County Convention and Visitor's Bureau Tourism Summit. An annual event, the summit drew in local business owners, government officials and students to hear about the multiple facets of tourism in the East-



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ern Panhandle and the state of West Virginia as a whole.

CVB Director and CEO Annette Gavin Bates opened the day sharing some of the county's successes over the past year. She told a packed room that Jefferson County was number one in visitor spending in the state last year and she is working to make sure that trend continues.

"Tourism is going to save this county and this state," Gavin Bates stressed.

The day was divided into multiple sessions focusing on such topics as Promoting Jefferson County, Story Rides, Being a Voice for the Tourism Industry and Pitching the County, a segment featuring local students promoting a local business.

Story Rides was presented by Alden Roth and David Landis with Village 2 Village. The concept centers on a coming push for bike connectivity specifically but which could also be for hikers and more.

— The Journal

SOUTH

BLUEFIELD
City leaders are still working to grow entrepreneurship in Bluefield.



In recent years, the city has pushed a burgeoning entrepreneurship campaign through various workshops and incubator programs, including the transformation of the former freight station on Bluefield Avenue into the Bluefield Commercialization Station. A food truck program operated by the Bluefield Economic Development Authority also helps to get entrepreneurs started in the food industry.

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STATE

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“We are trying to do everything we can to support local entrepreneurs who exist and individuals who want to be entrepreneurs and develop their own businesses,” Sam Wolford, executive director of the Bluefield Economic Development Authority, said. “We are working one on one with individuals and trying to provide as much support as we can.”

One such upcoming initiative will attempt to link potential entrepreneurs with local businesses.

The inaugural JC Robinson Entrepreneur to Entrepreneur event will be held on Wednesday, May 6, from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the Bluefield Arts Center, which is located at 500 Bland Street.

— Bluefield Daily Telegraph

OHIO VALLEY

PARKERSBURG
The Wood County Board of Education spent a significant portion of its meeting Tuesday night wrestling with how to handle tens of thousands of cubic yards of excess dirt at the new Lubeck Elementary construction site.

In a previous meeting, the board had approved a plan to place the dirt in “Area A” at the rear of the property. Ryan Taylor, president and CEO of Pickering Associates, explained that this originally “made a lot of sense at that time to put that value in the property,” but new information has changed the risk profile.

Taylor said the situation grew more complicated when a previously overlooked water feature at the back of the property was reclassified.

Originally thought to be an ephemeral “ditch” that flowed only after heavy rain, Taylor said further field investigation showed continuous water, tying it to a perennial stream

“We need to reclassify that stream as perennial because it has active water,” Taylor said. “Turns out there’s another perennial stream attached to this one that runs through this proposed fill site.”

— Parkersburg News and Sentinel

RIPLEY
Funding requests for local veterans and a historic festival, alongside a proposal for a new agricultural processing facility, topped the agenda for the Jackson County Commission during its meeting Wednesday, April 15.

Representatives from the Ohio Riv-

er Festival, Kassie Lawless and Keith King, requested \$5,000 to support the event held in Ravenswood each August. Established in 1935, the festival is one of the longest-running state festivals in West Virginia.

Lawless told commissioners the event attracts thousands of visitors annually.

“We don’t charge a gate fee to enter or for any of the events,” she said. “But festivals are very expensive to put on.”

The commission also heard a \$5,000 funding request from Vets 4 Vets. Raymond Vannest shared that the organization has expanded into seven counties—five in West Virginia and two in Ohio—providing mobility equipment and ramps for veterans and their spouses.

“Any money you’d approved would be used in Jackson County,” Vannest said. “We get some funding from the other places we serve for those areas.”

Vannest noted that the organization fills a critical gap for military families.

“The VA helps the veterans, but the spouses need help, too,” he said.

— Jackson Newspapers

METRO VALLEY

CHARLESTON
Students from Huff Consolidated Elementary and Middle School in Wyoming County earned national recognition in the Samsung Solve for Tomorrow competition, finishing among the top three teams in the country and winning the Community Choice Vote.

The honor brings \$110,000 in classroom technology and resources to the school.

State Superintendent of Schools Michele L. Blatt praised the team for its achievement and innovation in tackling a real-world issue affecting their community.

The student group, led by science and social studies teacher Brittany Miller-Baker, developed a water filtration project in response to ongoing water quality concerns in Wyoming County. Abandoned coal mines in the area have contributed to acid mine drainage, contaminating creeks, aquifers and other water sources with acidic water containing heavy metals and sulfates.

“When we were selected, we didn’t really know what to do, and we had tested some bottled water. We thought about it, and then we decided we were going to try to design some kind of system,” said Kaden Thomas, an 8th-grade student at Huff Consolidated.

— WV News

WVU

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“It’s the state’s flagship land-grant R1 university, and it plays a substantial role in economic development, educating students and tackling real challenges like rural health care, energy and national priorities like rare earth elements,” Wendland said. “All of that is important short- and long-term work. Short-term, my priority is to build relationships and do a lot of learning and listening. ...

“I want to spend time across the campus and state, getting to know the institution and understanding at a granular level the work that is being done every single day and where I as a leader can help provide support for different corners and finding new connections between things. There’s a lot of short- and long-term work that needs to be done.”

Wendland said that she has experience helping form strategic plans in her previous positions, and she’s excited to help West Virginia University work toward accomplishing goals in its “strategic compass” during her tenure in Morgantown.

“I know how powerful, motivating and focusing those activities can be,” she said. “They drive progress in a really meaningful way.”

She believes that a major challenge in 2026 for all of higher education is building trust with the community and showcasing the value of attaining a four-year degree. As one of West Virginia University’s new primary academic leaders, she intends to tackle that challenge head-on.

“We are uniquely positioned to lead on this,” Wendland said. “The impact of what we do as a university is real and tangible. It’s visible. It matters to people’s lives. I think we can build on that success, get the word out and have WVU be a flagship example. It’s a matter of us being able to tell our stories and demonstrate to the public the value that we bring.”

She’s also very impressed with the lev-

els of research that are conducted at West Virginia University.

According to a press release, Wendland herself has conducted research regarding “molecular mechanisms of endocytosis using yeast as a model system [that] contributes to the understanding of heart disease, cancer and other health issues.”

Knowing the real-world change that research can bring, Wendland is excited to be involved in all of the scientific work that WVU is doing across a number of different fields and industries.

“When I first started getting engaged with this search and learning more about WVU as an institution and where its academic strengths lie, I kept finding one amazing surprise after another,” she said. “It’s the strength of the physics and astronomy department and the fact that there’s a National Academy of Sciences member in that department. These are things I didn’t even know about. ...

“The Rockefeller Neurosciences Institute is such an incredible asset. There’s robotics and forensics and work that’s being done with rare earth elements. It’s remarkable, and (I’ve thought) ‘Why don’t more people know about this?’”

Though she’s from the West Coast, Wendland said that she’s quickly fallen in love with the people and culture of West Virginia, noting that it resonates with her as a “country girl” at heart. Wendland will be joined in Morgantown by her husband and their two dogs, and the family looks forward to enjoying the outdoor wonders that the Mountain State has to offer.

Additionally, when not working in her academic capacity, Wendland said she enjoys baking sourdough bread, creating stained glass crafts and practicing tai chi.

As she prepares to join the West Virginia University family, she looks forward to helping the institution unleash its “pent-up potential.”

“I could not be more excited to be a part of the bright future and do my part to help,” Wendland said.

HAMILTON

(Continued from Page 28)

We also need to continue to innovate. The coal industry is constantly evolving—through greater emissions reduction, and new uses for coal byproducts. The future of coal is not stuck in the past. It’s forward-looking, technology-driven, and adaptable to meet tomorrow’s challenges.

Let us be clear: the value of coal is not just economic. It is cultural, generational, and deeply personal for the families who have dedicated their lives to this work. In West Virginia, coal is not just a commodity—it is a calling. It teach-

es hard work, perseverance, and pride. Those are values worth defending.

As we look to the future, we must recognize coal’s indispensable role in a thriving economy and a strong America. We must ensure that public policy reflects reality—not political ideology. And we must continue to tell the truth about coal’s impact, both here in the Mountain State and across the nation.

For the sake of our jobs, our energy security, and our national strength, we cannot afford to turn our backs on coal. It’s not just part of our past—it’s key to our future.

Chris Hamilton is president and CEO of the West Virginia Coal Association.



An hour a day can work wonders



Linda
ARNOLD

How long have you been working on that side hustle?

You've taken the online courses, thought about it for months/years, but just haven't gotten into action.

Or maybe you want to train your dog or become a master gardener or gourmet cook.

Then there are those longings to up your golf/tennis/pickleball game. Or finally learn to play that guitar.

Like most of us, you have stops and starts when it comes to mastering a skill.

Frittering Away Your Time

A major key to success is resisting the urge to fritter away chunks of your day.

You start out in one direction, and the next thing you know you've meandered into something else. Pretty soon you've gone down a rabbit hole.

Distractions are everywhere. I sometimes catch myself in the act of "frittering" and call myself back onto the path.

Don't get me wrong. Visioning — and even daydreaming — can be helpful to give your mind the space to wander and conceive ideas. There's definitely a balance, though.

If you're willing to spend the time, money and effort to read, attend seminars and go to the right classes, chances are you can become an expert in a given field over time.

You've gotta commit to that final step of implementation, though.

In "The Necessity of Reinventing," author Terry Brock reminds us about the abundance of online information on

the Internet today. Not to mention AI resources at our fingertips.

You have to be willing to pay the price, though, in terms of your commitment. While it's a simple formula, it won't always be easy.

The Cambridge Handbook

Experts are made, not born.

That's the message of The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance. This book has 42 chapters and examines expertise in a variety of fields, including mathematics, medicine, acting and chess, among many others.

An important note of caution in this handbook is that too much practice can lead to burnout. Five hours of practice is the upper limit. Whew — that's a relief!

The handbook also states that expert performance is highly specific to limited areas, reinforcing the notion that experts know more and more about less and less.

Hardly anyone develops world class status in multiple areas. This perspective comes in handy when you start to compare yourself to experts in your chosen fields.

You know the drill. If you watched The Masters golf tournament last weekend, you may have put yourself down after watching Rory McIlroy or Scottie Scheffler.

I always remind myself, "That's their job! And they practice all the time."

Do The Math

Before you glaze over and think this is just pie-in-the-sky, consider this motivating factor. One hour each weekday equals 240 hours a year!

Now for the hard part — how to find that extra hour a day.

According to Vernon Myers, author of The Hour of Power, early mornings and late evenings are good times to develop yourself because you usually have un-

interrupted periods of time to concentrate.

Not rocket science, to be sure, although this discipline can be hard to develop.

Many business leaders set aside 20-30 minutes each morning — or at lunch — to read success stories and inspirational material — not just respond to incoming emails.

Techniques like this have been described as "sharpening the saw" in "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People."

No small feat, though, as we're usually responding to those incoming urgent requests!

Vitamin D

A healthy dose of the new Vitamin D — Discipline — is the key. If your goal is defined clearly and the payoff is desirable enough, this can be a successful technique.

You've probably heard that it takes 21 days to develop a new habit. I've also heard 60 days is more like it with challenging goals.

So, maybe you'd like to experiment with an hour a day for 21 days or 60 days. Breaking it down this way may seem less daunting.

And you could do five days a week, leaving you two days off.

An effective way to integrate a new habit into your life is to gradually add more of the new behavior while reducing the old behavior.

For example, if you have an ongoing challenge of being chronically late, it's best not to declare that you'll be early for everything in your life from now on.

If you affirm that you'll be early for one thing tomorrow, it suddenly seems more realistic.

As the new behavior begins to eclipse the old behavior, the habit will start to

take hold.

It's a push/pull discipline, and an important strategy is to link pleasure with the new event.

You'll also have a better chance of sustaining a new habit than if you sabotage your efforts by setting unrealistic goals at the outset.

Rather than sabotaging yourself by signing up for a half marathon, try a 5K walk/run.

Microtasking and Accountability

An hour a day provides the framework to stave off procrastination. A goal like "write a book" can be a hard mountain to climb.

Breaking tasks down into bite-size chunks, though, and defining the next immediate action can go a long way toward keeping the procrastination monster at bay.

Now that you have some tools, think about setting your sights. It helps to have a supportive "accountability buddy."

Reporting your progress — or lack of it — to someone else can keep you on your toes. You could also self report — by tracking your progress in a log or journal.

Be Patient

Above all, remember to reward yourself when you stick with your plan. And be gentle with yourself when you don't.

As the ancient Chinese proverb says, "With time and patience the mulberry leaf becomes a silk gown."

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PIZATELLA (Continued from Page 28)

Infrastructure is not a luxury; it is the backbone of our economy. For the over 500 member companies that make up the Contractors Association of West Virginia, the work we do is more than construction — it's about building the foundation for economic growth, job creation, and public safety. Stable funding allows us to plan, invest, and deliver

projects efficiently. Uncertainty, on the other hand, disrupts that process.

The Roads to Prosperity program, combined with the investments from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, have meant that West Virginia has made meaningful strides in recent years to improve its roads and bridges. Those gains were made possible because of dedicated funding mechanisms like the motor fuel excise tax. Walking away from that commitment — even temporarily — risks undoing that progress.

We all want to ease the burden on our friends and neighbors. Those burdens are real. But we must do so responsibly. Policies that sacrifice long-term infrastructure stability for short-term political gain are not the answer. Instead of undermining the State Road Fund, lawmakers should focus on sustainable solutions that address both affordability and infrastructure needs. Our state's future depends on it.

Let's not trade safer roads, stronger bridges, and a more competitive econo-

my for a fleeting sound bite in an election year or a temporary moment of relief at the pump. West Virginia deserves better — and so do the people who depend on its roads every single day.

Jason Pizatella is the chief executive officer of the Contractors Association of West Virginia (CAWW), the largest trade association representing all segments of the construction industry. CAWW is the state chapter of the Associated General Contractors of America and the American Road and Transportation Builders Association.

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