



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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West Virginia's Burgeoning Innovation Economy

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Anne Barth is the Executive Director of TechConnect West Virginia, a non-profit organization focused on driving innovation, cultivating entrepreneurship and creating greater economic diversity. With a coalition representing higher education, private industry and the public sector, TechConnect leads innovation-based economic development in the state. In her tenure with TechConnect, Barth has helped to advance programs and initiatives that foster startups, commercialization and entrepreneurship.

She serves as a member of the Board of Directors of the West Virginia Economic Development Authority, the West Virginia Science & Research Council, the West Virginia Small Business Development Center Advisory Committee, the WVU Women's Business Center, the West Virginia Bioscience Association, the West Virginia Manufacturing Extension Partnership Advisory Committee, the NASA West Virginia Space Grant Consortium, Advantage Valley and the Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education.

Barth has a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's degree in corporate and organizational communications from West Virginia University.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

Over the last several months, we've seen a marked uptick in collaborative efforts to put solid foundations under new ideas for projects that foster a fast-moving, forward-thinking economy in West Virginia.

Great ideas are emerging that spur innovation, support entrepreneurs and create jobs across the state. A wide variety of groups and communities have found common cause and are working to support new business creation, improve our startup infrastructure and train workers for in-demand jobs.

The West Virginia Forward initiative – championed by the state, West Virginia University and Marshall University – offers a blueprint that supports growth and renewal. This foundational study lays out a clear roadmap, helping partners around the state navigate



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new pathways that lead to a more prosperous, economically diversified West Virginia.

An \$83.7 billion memorandum of understanding with China Energy Investment Corporation could lead to extensive infrastructure investment, revitalization of the state's petrochemical industry and other spinoff industries. Tied with the ongoing development of an Appalachian storage hub for gas liquids, these developments bode well for West Virginia's future.

While there's no silver bullet when it comes to economic diversification, one thing is certain: it won't happen without innovation, entrepreneurs and investment. Research funding and tech-based economic activity that produce high-performing startup companies are clearly linked.



Anne Barth speaks with Obed D. Louissaint, Vice President of Human Resources, IBM Cognitive Solutions, Digital and Research, at TechConnect's 2017 WV Coding & Cyber Summit



*Left: Senators Joe Manchin and Shelley Moore Capito discuss technology expansion in West Virginia at TechConnect's 2017 WV Coding & Cyber Summit
Right: Rod Roush, Plant Manager for PTI, Inc., in Point Pleasant, holds a sample of the Lock-N-Load™ Feed System – a product of the ScaleUp WV program*



Regionally, we see the transformation that has occurred in Pittsburgh, which continues to invest in entrepreneurs, higher education and research as it transitions from an economy based on steel to a thriving medical, research and technology hub.

And at the national level, “flyover country” in America is finally getting the attention it deserves, with initiatives like “Rise of the Rest” working to channel investment capital to rural America. As the saying goes, “talent is equally distributed, but opportunity is not.” We have to work to level the playing field for our entrepreneurs and inventors so they have a foundation on which to build.

TechConnect’s mission is to help diversify the state’s economy through technology-based economic development. We know that today’s economic advantages include innovation, knowledge workers and risk capital, and we’re committed to helping entrepreneurs find the technical assistance and support they need to launch and thrive.

In our ScaleUp West Virginia program, TechConnect partnered with five “Centers of Excellence” across the state to assist 122 entrepreneurs and small businesses, aid in the launch of 30 new companies, help create 30 new products and add 59 new jobs. Companies that previously had served

only one industry found new product lines and new markets, building resiliency along the way. Researchers made progress in developing new technologies and processes, earning patents and licenses. And entrepreneurs who started with little more than a dream built and launched startup companies that are poised to grow.

Two of our new programs – TechAssist and NextUp West Virginia – will build on the work achieved in the ScaleUp program to assist those small businesses in reaching the next level of success, with an emphasis on strengthening access to capital for growing firms.

We also realize that the nature of work will continue to be disrupted as new technologies revolutionize all industry sectors, creating even more demand for a digitally fluent workforce.

Microsoft’s Bill Gates says that people with expertise in science, engineering and economics will be the most sought after, as workers proficient in those subjects will be “the agents of change for all institutions.”

Our education system has to match the jobs of the 21st century, and many of those will require software coding, cybersecurity and other digital skills. The global shortage of cyber specialists alone is estimated to reach two million by 2019.

West Virginia’s educational system – from K-12 through 2- and 4-year institutions – is adding courses and creating opportunities for students to prepare for in-demand jobs. Today’s employers also place a high priority on social and emotional skills.

Earlier this year, Google reported that the top characteristics of success among their workers are “being a good coach, communicating and listening well, having empathy toward and being supportive of colleagues, and being a good critical thinker and problem solver.”

If we successfully address both the technical and soft skills gaps, West Virginia stands to gain from the “hereshoring” trend – bringing tech and manufacturing jobs back to the U.S. from overseas as companies reevaluate labor costs, supply chains and proximity to customers. In our quest for economic growth, we need to inspire an environment where innovation and entrepreneurship thrive and where research is supported, with a solid foundation for our business startups and future workforce.

Is 2018 the breakthrough year for West Virginia? Will we build solid foundations under many of our “castles in the air?” With collaboration and perseverance, I believe we can make it happen. ▽