



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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Coalfield Development and the Need for Economic Diversification

Brandon Dennison, Founder & Chief Executive Officer
Coalfield Development

Brandon Dennison is the founder and CEO of the Coalfield Development Corporation, a network of social enterprises working throughout the region to build a new economy in the wake of the coal industry's rapid decline.

Born and raised near Ona, West Virginia, Dennison has experience working in private sector sales and public housing. He has served as Youth Director at Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church and as Faith Outreach Coordinator for the West Virginia Wilderness Coalition.

Dennison holds a master's degree in public affairs with a concentration in nonprofit management from Indiana University, where he also earned a certificate in social entrepreneurship. He holds undergraduate degrees in history and political science from Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Dennison recently completed the Community Progress Leadership Institute at Harvard University Law School and participated in the Clinton Global Initiative. In 2014, he was named as one of *The State Journal's* Generation Next: 40 under 40 – the next wave of leaders who will guide the state and its communities toward the future.

For so long, our leaders have talked about the need for “economic diversification.” Well, it's time to make this goal a reality. Coalfield Development, through a family of social enterprises, demonstrates that it is possible to create quality jobs in West Virginia in sectors like sustainable construction, environmental remediation, artisan-based entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture and renewable energy. We think that all of these fields have real potential for growth in the region, but we didn't just draw them out of a hat or choose them because they sounded good. Other thought leaders in the region have already done lots of legwork to demonstrate that these are promising economic industries for diversifying our Appalachian economy.

Revitalize Appalachia creates opportunities for low-income residents in sustainable construction. As nonrenewable resources become more scarce



and abandoned buildings blight our rural areas, our community leaders are increasingly harnessing the power of adaptive reuse. By converting old buildings and repurposing old materials, we inject new life into spaces and communities who thought their best days were behind them. By incorporating the latest green-building practices into new construction, we save resources for future generations. According to a recent economic assessment by the Appalachian Regional Commission, the rise in green-building certifications is a significant trend in the national energy economy. Increasingly, LEED certification has become a mandate in the construction and renovation of public sector buildings.

Closely tied to the ethos behind Revitalize Appalachia's sustainable construction methods is **Reclaim Appalachia's** focus on innovative reclamation. Reclaim crews convert former mine lands into community and economic assets through agriculture, forestry and renewable energy. They also take on deconstruction and salvage of abandoned and dilapidated buildings. An estimated 741,000 acres of mined lands in Appalachia could be available for reforestation and carbon sequestration. A 2014 study by Downstream Strategies found that remediating abandoned mine lands could create green-collar jobs and help diversify local economies by creating a cleaner natural environment. For every million dollars in capital investment, an estimated 13 jobs would be created, along with 12 jobs for every million spent on operation and maintenance. According to this estimate, if \$511 million is required to remediate water-related abandoned mine lands across Central Appalachia, between 6,000 and 7,000 jobs would be created.



All Coalfield Crew Members work a 33-6-3 schedule: 33 hours a week on-the-job training, six hours in the classroom pursuing an associate's degree and three hours focused on personal and professional development



Image 1: Coalfield's Crew Members and staff are dedicated to rebuilding the Appalachian economy through mentorship, education and employment **Image 2:** Crew members working for Saw's Edge Woodshop learn safety skills, product design and fabrication techniques while constructing custom furniture, home décor pieces and business furnishings **Image 3:** Swiss chard, destined for local restaurants or the Farm Share Subscription Program, is harvested from one of Refresh Appalachia's greenhouses

Hand-crafted objects and the creation of place-based experiences for visitors are major sources of income and employment in Appalachia. Artists are part of the creative economy. **Rediscover Appalachia** identifies and activates arts-based entrepreneurship opportunities and provides authentic Appalachian products and cultural experiences. A 2003 survey by Marshall University for the West Virginia Development Office found that the 2,539 craftspeople in West Virginia had a direct economic impact of around \$54.5 million through sales and revenues. But West Virginia may not be taking full advantage of the sector; craft producers in neighboring states like Kentucky have annual sales of \$252.4 million.

No other sector has been as heavily touted for its potential to create economic and social benefit for the Appalachian region as the development of a local food system. **Refresh Appalachia** develops

farmers, supports food producers through a regional food hub and develops the local food economy to retain wealth and improve access to healthy food. Both supply and demand for local food has grown over the past few years, despite the broader economic recession. A recent study found that if West Virginia farmers grew enough fruits and vegetables to meet the in-season fresh produce needs of all state residents, such a shift would generate 1,723 new jobs and contribute an additional \$35.7 million in local sales.

West Virginians spend \$2.5 billion on food for home consumption, \$421 million of which is spent on vegetables and fruits. The study shows that a five percent boost in the local food consumption by residents would generate an increase in annual income of \$200 million. For every dollar spent on local food, between \$0.55 and \$0.78 is re-circulated into the local economy.

Rewire Appalachia focuses on electrical, solar and technology industries. Along with local foods, renewable energy and energy efficiency are among the most closely watched sectors in central Appalachia. Two recent factors, the structural decline of coal and rising energy costs, have helped them emerge as potential economic growth sectors.

Solar photo-voltaic technology creates more jobs per unit of energy output than any other technology – including fossil fuels and other renewables, according to a recent report by the Mountain Institute. In 2012, the solar industry employed 120,000 workers across the country and continues to hire faster than the overall economy. These jobs are nearly impossible to outsource. Although solar panels can be built elsewhere, installation requires local and regional workers to design systems, procure the equipment and install the systems.

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West Virginia Simulated Workplace

Kathy D'Antoni, EdD
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in West Virginia. The lessons, skills and attitudes acquired by the emerging workforce gives hope and direction to our youth. Reaching these students as they begin making decisions regarding their future exposes and engages them with industries relevant to West Virginia's economic growth.

It is important that West Virginia's emerging workforce – its youth – have the opportunity to reach their individual potential and to have a voice in creating their future. Therefore, it is critical in growing the economy of West Virginia that education focuses on nurturing, training and retaining our state's emerging workforce. ▽

¹Crotty, James. *How to Solve America's Low-Skills Crisis*, Forbes, 2015.



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Brandon Dennison
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Much of the employment potential in renewable energy and energy efficiency is in “middle-skill jobs,” which require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree. Surprisingly to many, our West Virginia hills have favorable solar resources. The National Renewable Energy Laboratory estimates 4,200 MW of technical capacity for solar power in West Virginia. Former coal mines and other types of degraded lands are highly suitable for this use. And demand for solar power in West Virginia is growing, as evidenced by the number of solar cooperatives that have recently formed around the state.

It's time to finally diversify our economy, especially in southern West Virginia. Sustainable construction, reclamation, arts-based entrepreneurship, local agriculture and renewable energy are five viable strategies to achieve this long sought-after goal. ▽



Attitude Defines Our Altitude: Changing the Conversation About Broadband

Robert Hinton
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These two components form the basis of West Virginia's Interactive Broadband Mapping System. This integrated system will generate the information needed to strategically address the digital divide in West Virginia.

The West Virginia Speed Test Portal was launched in October 2017. The speed test is available at: **broadband.wv.gov**. To date, more than 25,000 speed tests have been collected, and speed tests have been conducted in each of West Virginia's 55 counties.

West Virginia can no longer settle for service that does not meet the needs of our residents and businesses. The Council has long maintained that the FCC reports lack the user data needed to precisely measure service. The West Virginia Speed Test Portal will enable the Council to identify unserved and underserved communities and, in turn, assist them in moving forward with broadband development projects.

State and Federal Policy

With the 2017 enactment of House Bill 3093, our state leaders

signaled the willingness to develop policies that encourage broadband development. Following this lead, we are identifying areas for improvement, including the utilization of road rights-of-way and fiber installation in conjunction with road construction projects.

At the federal level, the Council submitted comments to the FCC in 2017 concerning the requirements of the Connect America Fund II. The Council requested that the FCC give special consideration to the identification of eligible areas. The Council also requested that the FCC grant maximum flexibility to provide the greatest level of competition possible.

The Council is committed to the bold pursuit of broadband on behalf of residents and businesses throughout West Virginia. Join us in this endeavor by learning more about broadband's importance to West Virginia and getting involved in community efforts to establish or enhance broadband. It is time for West Virginia to get connected. ▽