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Down Country Roads and Out of Crisis, Comes Opportunity



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Sarah Biller is the Executive Director of Vantage Ventures, an initiative fueled by The John Chambers College of Business and Economics at West Virginia University to build scalable, investable companies in the Mountain State. A serial entrepreneur, she co-founded the FinTech Sandbox and was recently named one of the Top 100 Women in FinTech by global fintech hub LATTICE80.

Along a typical two lane road, curved and swooping past places, some formally named – like the community of Onoto, where my relatives have been since the 1780s and is said to be named after the pseudonym of an early 20th century author whose Japanese-themed fiction found fans in Pocahontas Country – and straight up the mountain past Hickory Point, a ridge line so full of the trees of the same name that one often has to avoid a traffic jam of squirrels, is a small mountain valley.

The road splits in three directions at the top. Turning left will take you to the Williams River, going straight leads to the Scenic Highway and the other road is a dead-end lane. Our family farm lies at the crossroads.

Even if I were blindfolded, I am certain I could safely guide you to our farm from any direction. I have carried a mental picture of this special place all over the world with me. And, not unlike the roads leading to our farm, many paths led me back home to lead the initiative envisioned by John Chambers that would boost West Virginia’s competitiveness and help it become a start-up state.

With a year-and-a-half under our belt at Vantage Ventures (under the John Chambers College of Business and Economics at West Virginia University), it is clear that the confluence of forces that changed my own personal path also favor West Virginia’s future. These forces – localization and digitization – historically at odds, have been fundamentally altered because of COVID-19.

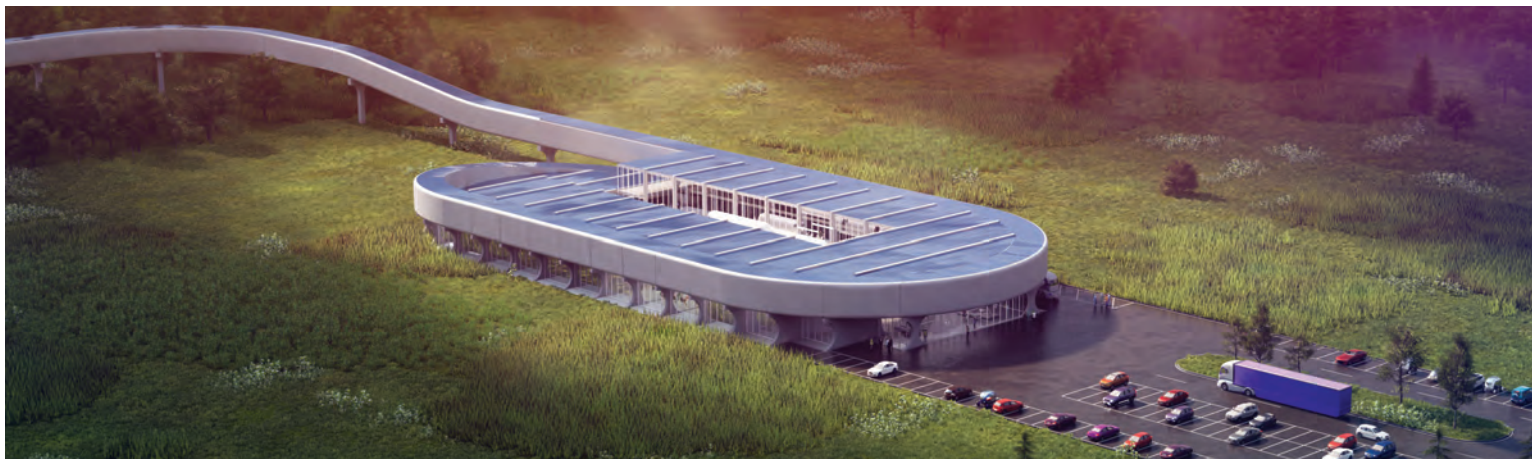
And, as unlikely as it might seem, I believe opportunity awaits West Virginia on the other side of this crisis.

It is because of the efforts of homegrown and talented leaders like Dr. Clay Marsh, General Jim Hoyer and their multidisciplinary team that West Virginia is feted across the nation for our successful vaccine distribution and administration strategy. This team understood that a successful vaccine roll-out in rural West Virginia necessitated a solution that drew upon lessons learned from global experiences in public health, defense and others, but at its heart galvanized stakeholders on the ground level.

This comes on the heels of successfully securing the Virgin Hyperloop Certification



Photo Caption 1
Virgin Hyperloop passenger experience



Center. Seeing an opportunity for all West Virginians to play a key role (again) in what has been called the fourth industrial revolution, we combined our knowledge of emerging technology sectors with centuries of experience tackling complex civil engineering challenges in our mountains with visionary partners. Our academic, public and private sectors came together to act as one state and outmaneuvered larger and better funded regions in the U.S. to secure the partnership.

Virgin Hyperloop saw their future in West Virginia as we should see it ourselves. Access to our significant workforce of advanced engineering and scientific talent, as well as a large pool of local construction and skilled trades workers, will help Virgin Hyperloop more efficiently and safely design, construct, operate and maintain their certification center and, eventually, the nationwide system was a tremendous plus to their decision-makers. Our state provides a steady supply of raw materials, rare earth minerals and multiple sources of energy that will de-risk their supply chain as much as meet their sustainability goals. When combined, these two areas provide us an opportunity to manufacture tubes, pods and sensors, among other key inputs that go into building a fully autonomous transit system.

And, due to digitization, our deeply talented workforce can collaborate with a set of domestic and global partners on these novel ideas. It should not be overlooked that sectors from healthcare to financial services to industrials, consumer goods and even education have all been spurred by the pandemic to leapfrog historical barriers. Consultancy McKinsey proclaimed in mid-2020, “Recent data shows that we have vaulted five years forward in consumer and business digital adoption in a matter of around eight weeks.”

Underscoring the durability of this trend is the adoption of digital tools by companies of all sizes to keep employees healthy, collaborative and productive in a period of pandemic. As Brad Smith observed earlier than most, this shift to remote working holds the promise to propel our economy forward. By connecting



Photo Caption 2 Rendering of the Virgin Hyperloop Certification Center to be located on nearly 800 acres in West Virginia's Tucker and Grant Counties.

Photo Caption 3 Virgin Hyperloop passenger experience

talent to opportunity to our great outdoors, we are extraordinarily positioned to attract back some of our brightest minds, as well as others who see the promise our region holds, and create the future we want for West Virginia.

It is not just reflecting on our success with vaccinations or the Virgin Hyperloop opportunity (or the others that are coming) that lead me to envision West Virginia's future differently. It goes without saying that we must now exert the concentrated effort to close the state's broadband gap with the same intensity that the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital tools. Even with this daunting challenge, I do not believe it is too ambitious to set forth the challenge that West Virginia can get back to work sooner than most states on initiatives like Virgin Hyperloop and others and lead the country in economic recovery rates and innovative ideas.

Given the unlikely opportunity presented by this crisis, country roads need not be the obstacle history has suggested, but a generational lesson. Our history of resilience and might is the reason why we are positioned to overcome the challenges we confront and become an economic catalyst for the region and the rest of the nation. Country roads not only take us home, but they also provide a reminder that we know how to scale mountains. **V**