



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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The Opportunity to Grow and Prosper Where We are Planted

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Stephen G. Roberts is president of the West Virginia Chamber of Commerce, a statewide organization that seeks greater prosperity and a higher standard of living for West Virginians. The Chamber is the voice of business throughout the state and is West Virginia's largest association of employers whose members employ more than half of our state's workers. The West Virginia Chamber was recently voted the number one Chamber of Commerce in the nation for member loyalty and retention by ACCE, American Chamber of Commerce Executives. Additionally, the West Virginia Chamber has been recognized for achieving the highest market share and largest new member growth in the nation.

A West Virginia native and graduate of West Virginia Wesleyan College, Mr. Roberts previously worked for the Huntington, West Virginia Regional Chamber of Commerce and BASF Corporation. He taught in the Community College of Marshall University and is active in several civic and business organizations. Among other community activities, Steve is the President of Leadership West Virginia and Chairman of the Board of Jobs for West Virginia Graduates.

Steve took a lead role in uniting the state's business community to pass the successful Freeport Amendment and was influential in building the coalition which helped repeal West Virginia's long out dated Business and Occupation Tax.

The pathway to finding a job and the buying power and security brought by steady employment is becoming less certain for many West Virginians. Federal data reveals our state has the nation's highest unemployment rate, second fastest population decline, lowest level of participation in the workforce by working age adults and less job creation than all other states.

This troubling state of affairs is documented in reports compiled by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census. Our state had a seven-year stretch of reasonably good news, during which per capita income and net jobs increased, providing tax revenue to counties and the state. This period of growth allowed communities and government to pay down long-term debt, build new schools and offer employment to our fellow citizens. Energy production, chiefly coal mining, led the way in improving our economy through much of this period.

Many West Virginians are surprised that, historically, our state's highest wages are paid in counties that produce the most coal. During the 10-year coal boom, the highest average annual earnings to workers came from Boone County, then our largest coal producer. Unfortunately, with the ending of this boom, the picture for many West Virginia working families darkens. Additionally, our state's manufacturing workers rank sixth in pay nationally.

The West Virginia Chamber of Commerce, whose members employ more than half of our state's workers, is adding its voice with legislative and state leaders who know we can and should do better.



WEST VIRGINIA CHAMBER

Most job creation in any state comes from existing business. As West Virginia's largest business advocacy, member-supported network, the Chamber has unique abilities to hear from employers who love West Virginia and want the opportunity to grow and prosper where they are planted.

The Chamber has developed a jobs plan for West Virginia's future and invites members' thoughts and comments.

- **Manufacturing:** First, let's reverse the job losses. Our manufacturing members tell us West Virginia's tax structure impedes job creation. The number one problem identified is our tax on equipment and inventory. Manufacturers also tell us that replacing an aging workforce with competent, well trained and drug-free new workers is a must for the 21st Century workforce.
- **Energy Exploration and Production:** The world needs our fuel. Nearly 70 percent of U.S. electricity is produced by natural gas and coal. Technology, research and infrastructure are needed to keep these West Virginia resources viable.
- **Banking and Insurance:** Some small states have attracted jobs from banks and insurance companies. These companies are "back office" intensive. Our low commercial occupancy costs and competitive wages could make us a real center of banking, insurance and credit company back office jobs.



- **Department of Defense Contracting:** West Virginia is 50th in the nation in sales to the U.S. Department of Defense. The Pentagon is the world's largest purchaser of goods and technical services. Let's develop a vehicle for supplying those needs.
- **Health Care and Education:** With so many people living in close proximity to our state, continuing to attract patients to world-class health facilities is a must. Health providers demand good schools and a culture of innovation in our communities.
- **Tourism and State Image:** Our image suffers in the national media. It will take a real campaign with more money to change regional and national perceptions. We have a wonderful story to tell. Let's recommit ourselves to a bigger, better message.
- **Universities and Research:** Our universities attract talent. Harnessing the innovation and horsepower of faculty and students is a must. Surrounding states have created research parks and innovation zones that keep our universities and their students at home.
- **Small Business and Entrepreneurs:** Long identified as each state's engine of job creation, small business needs well prepared, drug-free workers, high speed internet and freedom from overly burdensome paperwork and compliance filings.

The West Virginia Chamber believes strongly in West Virginia's future. We welcome your thoughts and input in driving our state forward. ▾