



VIEW*S*&VISIONS

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Change is Inevitable

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Keith Burdette joined Bowles Rice in early 2017 as the firm's Business Development Director, after serving as Cabinet Secretary for the West Virginia Department of Commerce and Executive Director of the West Virginia Development Office during the administration of West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin.

Keith assists Bowles Rice clients and attorneys with business and economic development issues. He has experience spearheading projects ranging from major economic development projects and workforce training programs to expansion of manufacturing facilities and site selection for new construction. He has significant working relationships with business leaders throughout the country, as well as internationally, and has a keen understanding of government, local to federal.

He began his career in public service in the West Virginia House of Delegates, where he served two terms. In 1982, he was elected to the West Virginia State Senate. Seven years later, he was elected the 42nd President of the State Senate. Keith also served for three years as director of policy and legislative relations in former Governor Bob Wise's administration.

He served as president of the Area Roundtable from 2004 to 2010, the umbrella organization for the Wood County Development Authority and the Parkersburg-Wood County Development Corporation.

Change is one of the most over-used words imaginable. Change occurs in a variety of ways, and regardless of how it happens...change is *inevitable*. For example, joining Bowles Rice was a change, as well as a choice, that created new opportunities and allowed me to look back at my tenure as Executive Director of the West Virginia Development Office and Secretary of Commerce.

At the Development Office, I *sold* West Virginia by identifying our strengths rather than waiting until we could right all the wrongs of our economy. I re-crafted our message, put our best foot forward and empowered my colleagues to take risks and believe we could compete. We experienced some success, including the recruitment of Proctor and Gamble. In retrospect, of course I reflect upon what more could have been done.

West Virginia's long-term economic success will not be measured by election cycles or legislative edicts, but by generations of West Virginians who attract new investment and competitive jobs. Strengthening our economy will take more than identifying effective incentives. We must decide what we want our economy to look like, and then create a comprehensive plan and acquire the needed resources to reach those goals.

Does good only come when taxpayers pay less? I'm a bargain hunter; however, it's not just about how cheap your life is, but rather how successful you can be. If society is devoid of diversity and opportunity for the sake of saving money today, we will achieve a low-cost, low-wage, limited opportunity climate. A strong economy lifts and broadens our state and reflects a future based on the balance of our financial resources with new opportunities.

A diverse economy requires the ability to attract high-wage industry and skilled professionals. Individuals with disposable income for restaurants and retail also make investments and contributions to charity that are critical to creating a thriving community. Unfortunately, this population has been leaving West Virginia for the last 40 years. Notably, today's professionals are mobile and choose to work where they want to live. To attract this workforce, companies and state government must think differently.

Influencing the direction of the economy demands commitment to systemic change on multiple fronts, most important being education.

West Virginia already ranks in the "top ten" for low cost of doing business. The Tax Foundation ranks us better than our neighboring states on lower taxes. When ranking West Virginia on the components of what businesses and individuals consider important, we don't do so well. The number one item in most surveys regarding the best states for business is workforce/education. West Virginia ranked last in workforce participation, number of available employees, and ability to retain college-educated workers. We rank last for population with a four-year degree. If you believe developing an effective education and workforce development system is a minor problem for business, you are wrong. The number one driver for young professionals with children who are deciding where to live is the quality of the school system.



Fixing this problem is not *cheap* or *fast*. Can we create an economy of desirable jobs with long term sustainability if we solely focus on being a low-cost state?

No. Influencing the direction of the economy demands commitment to systemic change on multiple fronts, most important being education.

Higher education must also be an equal partner in the solution by producing competent, capable, and effective teachers. Our colleges and universities must develop the means to deliver higher education to a population that is under-educated and unprepared for the changing economy, as well as recognize that this population segment is “place-bound,” has limited access to a college campus, is likely unprepared for traditional college work and even greater insecurities about re-entering the education system at an advanced age. Some of our colleges understand this challenge and have addressed the issue with varying degrees of success. However, we must be more aggressive in advancing distance and accelerated learning programs throughout

the state. While some communities are making college free, we are going in the other direction. Costs are becoming a major deterrent for a population that is already economically challenged.

Simply, we are not effectively educating our population. *Yes*, we are doing some amazing things in education and yes, we have some great teachers...*but it's not enough*. We must ask ourselves why we are not progressing and what to do about it. It has been almost three decades since a state-wide community discussion occurred on public education. I call upon our best, brightest, and most open-minded in education and government to begin a dialogue about education and our future – with the goal of establishing clear objectives, an achievable timeline, and measurable results.

I believe West Virginia can thrive. We can find it within ourselves to evolve by empowering our people and strengthening our economy. ▽