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We laid out five specific ways that President Trump's budget hurts Appalachia, a part of the country that voted strongly for him, and then used the sixth editorial to respond to Trump's budget director.

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THE ROANOKE TIMES
FRIDAY, MARCH 17, 2017
By Dwayne Yancey

Trump backhands Appalachia

Appalachia voted for Donald Trump more enthusiastically than almost any other part of the country.

In the Super Tuesday primary, Trump's best county was Virginia's Buchanan County, where nearly 70 percent of the voters picked him over any other Republican. In November, Trump ran stronger in Appalachia than any other Republican *ever*. He won more than 90 percent of the localities in Appalachia, taking the entire region by a landslide margin of nearly 2-1.

Trump has an odd way of returning the favor.

Much of the attention about Trump's proposed budget has focused on the classic fights — he wants to cut funding to the Environmental Protection Agency by 31 percent; he wants to eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Here's something that hasn't gotten nearly as much attention, but should: Trump also wants to eliminate funding for the Appalachian Regional Commission.

The other cuts are classic right-vs.-left showdowns. That doesn't diminish their importance; it just means they're pretty predictable fights. Environmentalists will be in an uproar over the EPA. Arts groups will bemoan the fate of the NEA. Let's face it: Not a lot of those folks backed Trump last fall.

Here's who should be concerned about the proposed elimination of the Appalachian Regional Commission: Anyone who's interested in trying to build a new economy in Appalachia. That means a whole lot of people who voted for Trump.

Perhaps that's why Rep. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem, thinks the commission will survive: "ARC has provided money for a lot of good programs in the Appalachian regions, particularly the hard-hit coalfields of Southwest Virginia. I doubt that the cut will be in the final House product." (That hasn't stopped supporters from creating the hashtag #SaveARCgov as a rallying point.)

What is the Appalachian Regional Commission, and why should anyone care about some seemingly obscure federal agency? Think of it as the regional version of Virginia's tobacco commission, a grant-awarding entity charged with rebuilding the economy in the state's former tobacco-growing counties.

The origin of the ARC goes back to the 1960s, when it started becoming apparent just how far Appalachia lagged behind the rest of the nation. John Kennedy saw that first-hand when he campaigned in West Virginia, site of a critical primary in the 1960 election. Then came the best-seller "Night Comes to the Cumberlands: The Biography of a Depressed Area." Think of it as the "Hillbilly Elegy" of its day. Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty, and the commission was created in 1965 to address the unique challenges that confronted a region that is now officially defined as running from northern Mississippi to southern New York.

Since then, the agency has spent more than $4 billion on Appalachia, which in turn has leveraged $16 billion in private funding. In that time, poverty rates have been cut nearly in half — from 31 percent to 17 percent. The number of high-poverty counties has been cut from 295 to 90. The percentage of high school graduates has doubled; Appalachian students now graduate at the same rate as the rest of the nation. The infant mortality rate there has been cut by two-thirds. All that counts as success.

On the other hand, Appalachia's economy still lags behind that of the rest of the nation, often through no fault of its own. Griffith likes to point out the difficulty that Dickenson County faces: It's so mountainous that it had only two sites suitable for development – but had to use one of those to build a new high school. Why'd it have to build a new high school? Because the coal economy is collapsing and the county's population is dropping so fast that it's no longer practical to operate three small, separate schools. But Trump's going to bring back coal, right? Won't the free market fix things in Appalachia then? No, and no. Trump is not going to be able to bring back coal. There might be an uptick in metallurgical coal used in making steel (assuming American steel rebounds), but the long-term prospects for steam coal used by utilities remain grim.

In any case, Appalachia is a lot more than coal. Virginia has 25 counties and eight cities along its western border that are covered by the Appalachian Regional Commission; only six of those produce coal.

Let's look at some of the specific things the Appalachian Regional Commission has helped fund in Virginia within the past year — all with the idea of helping lay the foundation for a new economy in rural areas inflicted with unforgiving topography.

- $2.2 million to help Mountain Empire Community College train students to operate drones — part of Wise County's bid to create a trained workforce to attract companies who want to test unmanned systems there.
- $1.4 million to start cybersecurity programs at the University of Virginia's College at Wise, Mountain Empire Community College and Southwest Virginia Community College — part of the region's bid to refashion itself as a technology hub.
- $1.3 million to the Southwest Virginia Alliance for Manufacturing — a nonprofit trade association based in Abingdon — to help advise manufacturers serving the coal industry how to retool their operations to survive in a post-coal economy.

- Nearly $1.3 million to Mountain Empire to re-train out-of-work miners for jobs as utility linemen.
- $800,000 to Virginia Community Capital, a Christiansburg-based nonprofit that operates a bank set up to provide the final piece of funding for economic development projects in economically distressed parts of the state.

We could go on and on. Ideally, the point is made. These seem like *exactly* the sorts of things the federal government should be doing to help build a new economy in Appalachia. You can argue, of course, that maybe federal spending is so out of control that Trump's budget cuts are necessary. For argument's sake, let's accept that and look at trade-offs. The Appalachian Regional Commission asked for $120 million in funding for the coming year. Trump wants to increase funding for charter schools by $168 million. He wants to increase defense spending by $54 *billion.* Let's not even talk about defense. It sure looks like Trump just said charter schools — which, if they're going to work, are going to primarily be in metro areas — are more important than Appalachia's economy. That's not exactly making Appalachia great again.

THE ROANOKE TIMES
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 2017
By Dwayne Yancey

Inexplicable

In 2009, Floyd County officials were presented with some unhappy facts. A study had found that Floyd had the fourth-lowest wages in the state for jobs within the county.

Perhaps the key part of that phrase was “jobs within the county.” That’s because most people in Floyd County didn’t work in the county; 69 percent of the workers in Floyd commuted to jobs outside the county. There simply weren’t enough jobs in the county and the ones that were there didn’t pay very well.

The county’s economic development director pronounced this situation “not sustainable for our citizens.”

The solution seemed clear: Floyd County needed to attract more jobs to the county, ideally higher-paying ones.

The county already had land to offer in its business park. The county also had an empty industrial building to market, one that told the tale of a changing economy. Once it had been home to a clothing manufacturer called Donnkenny, which in its prime had been one of the county’s largest employers. The company closed it in 2000 – moving all its production overseas.

Floyd did not lack for options to offer the old economy; there just wasn’t much old economy going on to reciprocate. What Floyd lacked were options for the new economy, which is where the growth is. So the county opted for a different approach – to see what it could do to attract technology jobs.

Toward that end, Floyd created the high-tech equivalent of an industrial shell building – the Floyd Innovation Center. The 9,000 square-foot building is intended as a place where start-ups could, well, get started. There are “clean rooms” and lab space, along with regular rooms for offices. Since the building opened in 2014, Floyd has counted eight new businesses that have gotten started through the Floyd Innovation Center, one of which has “graduated” to larger quarters elsewhere.

Floyd is obviously not yet Silicon Valley; the employment numbers are admittedly small. On the other hand, those are eight businesses that didn’t previously exist there; economies do not transform overnight, at least not in a good way. If you’re a Floyd official, you see the Floyd Innovation Center as a big talking point – witness the prominent place it occupies on the county’s economic development website.

Now for the curious part: Half the money to build the $2.3 million Floyd Innovation Center came from federal agencies that President Trump wants to eliminate – the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Economic Development Administration. Even more curious: Floyd County cast nearly 66 percent of its votes for Trump in last fall's election.

Much of the controversy over Trump's proposed budget has focused on things like his proposal to eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Those, however, are very predictable cuts. Lots of other Republicans might have proposed zeroing out those agencies.

Trump, though, won with especially strong support from rural voters. Floyd County is as good a place to look as any. It was a Republican county even back in the days when there were hardly any Republicans in Virginia. Yet Trump still ran stronger there than any other Republican presidential candidate since Ronald Reagan in his 49-state landslide in 1984.

So why does Trump's budget punish the very communities where he ran best? The most frequently-cited example of this has been his proposal to eliminate the Appalachian Regional Commission, which awards grants for economic development projects in Appalachia. However, the lesser-known Economic Development Administration may be an even better example because it's bigger and therefore has more impact.

Case in point: The Appalachian Regional Commission contributed $369,000 toward the Floyd Innovation Center; the Economic Development Administration contributed $800,000.

The official word from the Trump administration is that the EDA has "limited measurable impacts and duplicates other federal programs." That does not seem true. The EDA's impacts in this part of Virginia, at least, seem quite measureable – and the main agency that would "duplicate" its work is also slated for elimination.

Here's some measurement:

n The Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center got started in 1988 with a $600,000 grant from the EDA. The funding for its second phrase in 2012 included a $1.98 million grant from the EDA. Today, the center has grown to house more than 180 businesses employing more than 3,000 workers.

n VT Knowledgeworks, a Tech program to help spin off new businesses, got started with $2 million from the EDA. Two major "graduates" of that program are Aeroprobe and Torc Robotics, which between them have nearly 100 employees and are considered some of the region's fastest-growing companies.

It's not an exaggeration to say that the EDA has helped jump-start a technology hub in Blacksburg, one that in time might transform the economy of the whole region. It's not hard to imagine some of those tech jobs spinning off to a Floyd County that is now prepared to receive them.

Meanwhile, the EDA has:

n Funded the start-up of the New River Valley Business Center, a small business incubator that now has 32 tenants, and similar centers in Abingdon, Galax, Pulaski and elsewhere that have been instrumental in growing new employers.

n Paid for $3 million worth of water and sewer infrastructure at the Commerce Park in Pulaski County. That helped make it possible for the park to attract the Red Sun Farms greenhouse in 2013, which created 103 jobs and $21 million of investment.

n Paid for a lot of the broadband that’s been laid in rural Southside and Southwest Virginia, a key piece of infrastructure for a modern economy.

And the list goes on and on. It’s hard to find a more effective government agency, or one that’s had more demonstrable impacts, than the EDA, which mostly means deals with rural areas and inner cities.

For a president who got elected by insisting he’d be able to grow the economy and extend its benefits to “forgotten” parts of the country, these are inexplicable cuts. Trump said he wanted to make America great again. Perhaps he really meant that. His budget, though, does not make rural America great again. Sad.

THE ROANOKE TIMES
MONDAY, MARCH 27, 2017
By Dwayne Yancey

Broken promise

Whenever Donald Trump campaigned in Southwest Virginia last year, he invariably talked up his support for coal. He also talked up a specific way he'd do it – by investing in the "clean coal" technology that can scrub some of the carbon out of coal emissions.

"We're going to bring the coal industry back 100 percent," Trump declared during an appearance at Radford University. "If I win, we're going to go clean coal, and that technology is working. I hear it works."

He heard correctly. The technology – officially called "carbon capture" – does work. What doesn't work – not yet anyway – is a business model that makes carbon capture profitable. That hasn't stopped the research, though. Some of that research is taking place through the Virginia Center for Coal and Energy Research at Virginia Tech, which since 2009 has used an $11.5 million federal grant to test carbon capture at mines in Alabama, Tennessee and Virginia.

Carbon capture research may have the goal of creating environmentally-friendly coal but environmentalists haven't exactly been keen on it. They see "clean coal" as prolonging an industry they're reflexively against. Still, if even Barack Obama – famous for waging a "war on coal" – could see fit to include more than $3 billion for clean coal research in his stimulus package, surely Trump would do even better, right?

Wrong.

Trump's proposed budget cuts funding for energy research by almost 18 percent — $2 billion. Because the proposed budget came with few details attached, it's unclear just how much, if any, money would remain for the Office of Fossil Energy to spend on clean coal research. It's notable that some conservative groups – specifically the influential Heritage Foundation, whose ideas formed the basis for Trump's budget – had proposed eliminating the office entirely.

The CEOs of the nation's three largest coal companies were so alarmed that they recently joined with the United Mine Workers to send a letter to Trump, pleading with him to preserve funding for clean coal research, something they never had to worry about under Obama.

Something is not right with this picture: Obama did more for clean coal research than Trump is, yet it was Trump who ran on a platform of "we're going to go clean coal."

The question has to be asked: Did coal voters get conned?

Let’s step back a bit further: Appalachia was more enthusiastic for Trump than almost any other part of the country. In many counties, Trump ran stronger than any Republican presidential candidate ever.

Yet the budget that Trump has proposed undercuts the region’s ability to develop a new economy at almost every turn:

n Trump wants to eliminate the Appalachian Regional Commission, an agency that awards grants for economic development projects. Wise County has been trying to refashion itself as a technology hub, by promoting itself as a center for drone research and cybersecurity programs. Many of those programs – the drone classes and the cybersecurity classes at local colleges – have been funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission.

n Trump wants to eliminate the Economic Development Administration, an agency that awards grants for economic development projects in economically-distressed areas across the country. That’s the agency that has paid for a lot of the broadband Internet that’s been laid in Virginia’s coalfields – the key infrastructure for attracting any kind of technology-related jobs.

Want to know something else curious? Obama directed the EDA to pay special attention to coal communities; now Trump wants to get rid of the program entirely.

n Trump wants to eliminate the Abandoned Mine Land program, which has provided $90 million for the nation’s three biggest coal states – West Virginia, Kentucky and Pennsylvania – to turn old mine sites into potential economic development sites. Once again, things are backwards because there’s been a Republican-led (but bipartisan) effort to *expand* that program to other states. Rep. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem, has pointed out that one of the big obstacles to attracting manufacturing to the coalfields is a lack of developable sites. Expanding this program would help fix that, by providing money to level out former mines and install water, sewer and other infrastructure to make them marketable industrial sites. It’s hard to talk about expanding the program, though, when Trump wants to get rid of it entirely.

Appalachia gave Trump its love – and its votes. In return, Trump backhands some of his strongest supporters. Under Trump’s proposed budget, the coalfields would not get federal help to turn old mines into economic development sites . . . or lay in infrastructure to make them marketable . . . or retrain workers for new jobs in growing technology-related fields . . . or do any significant research that might save coal.

The Trump vision for coal counties seems to be limited simply to hoping traditional coal mining will come back and nothing more. That doesn’t seem realistic, though. He’s lifted some environmental regulations. Environmental regs, though, aren’t the only reason that coal has been dying. They may not even be the main reason. Appalachian coal has been losing out to western coal – where open-pit mining can be done with fewer workers, and therefore less expense. And coal everywhere has been undercut by cheap natural gas –

and renewables. It’s notable that the coal executives who asked Trump to preserve clean coal funding made the case that coal needed to be “cost competitive” with wind and solar, whose prices have been dropping.

There’s certainly an argument to be made that federal spending needs to be cut, period. Except the bottom line on the discretionary part of Trump’s budget ($1.15 trillion) is actually higher than what it is now ($1.07 trillion). The difference is that he would cut most domestic programs and spend more on the military and the proposed border wall. The one domestic program where Trump would spend more is $168 million more for charter schools, which will primarily benefit kids in metropolitan areas, simply because that’s where most people live. So if you want to look at it this way, Trump would take the money that Obama spent on economic development in the coalfields and instead spend it on city kids who want to go to a different school.

Is that really what people in the coalfields voted for?

THE ROANOKE TIMES
FRIDAY, APRIL 7, 2017
By Dwayne Yancey

Derailed

Here are a few more things that President Trump's proposed budget would eliminate: the Amtrak route through Clifton Forge and half the Amtrak trains through Lynchburg.

The Amtrak service that's scheduled to come to Roanoke later this year would apparently survive, though.

Those travel tips are buried deep in budget language that hasn't gotten much attention yet. Trump wants to reduce spending for virtually every domestic agency so that he can increase spending for the military, the proposed border wall, and an expansion of charter schools. This isn't about reducing federal spending; it's about changing priorities. His overall budget is actually larger than the present one. As part of this, Trump reduces funding for the Department of Transportation by 13 percent. Among the cuts: He would eliminate funding for Amtrak's long-distance routes so that the passenger rail system can "focus on better managing its state-supported and Northeast Corridor train services."

The train that will come to Roanoke is the Northeast Regional, which now runs from Boston to Lynchburg and back again. That's why it would apparently survive. Furthermore, the Virgina route for that train is paid for by the state, not the federal government, so as long as the Northeast Regional still runs, the Roanoke stop is protected. The long-distance routes whose funding would be eliminated include:

n The Cardinal, which runs from New York to Chicago – by way of Charlottesville, Staunton and Clifton Forge.

n The Crescent, which runs from New Orleans to New York – by way of Danville, Lynchburg and Charlottesville.

The National Association of Rail Passengers says 220 communities would lose all their rail service – Clifton Forge and Staunton being two of those. It's important to note that this is by no means a done deal. There are lots of Republicans who are saying that Trump's budget is "dead on arrival" on Capitol Hill. Still, it's a useful document to help understand the priorities of the new administration.

There are two ways to look at Trump taking a budget axe to Amtrak – we can either be surprised, or not surprised.

The latter first: We shouldn't be surprised because Trump's budget was essentially written by The Heritage Foundation, a leading conservative think tank, and conservative ideologues have long argued that we shouldn't be subsidizing Amtrak. At least not those long-distance routes.

Many conservative ideologues think rail passenger service should be more like air travel – run by private companies who are trying to make a profit. If passenger rail can't make a profit, then the government shouldn't subsidize it. Of course, the free market decided a long time ago that passenger rail in the United States was no longer profitable – otherwise Norfolk Southern would still be running the Powhatan Arrow.

The question is whether passenger rail is worth subsidizing to achieve other social goals – just as we subsidize city buses, partly to reduce congestion on the roads and partly because some people have no other way to get around. The Northeast corridor usually gets a pass in most critiques of Amtrak because it's popular with business travelers; 40 percent of Amtrak's ridership is on the Washington-to-Boston corridor. Instead, it's those money-draining long routes through the rest of the country that always draw the sharp eye of budget-cutters.

The surprise is that those long-distance routes overwhelmingly serve communities that voted for Trump – and voted heavily for him, too. That's a point that Jim Mathews, president of the National Association of Rail Passengers, has tried to make:

"It's ironic that President Trump's first budget proposal undermines the very communities whose economic hardship and sense of isolation from the rest of the country helped propel him into office. These working class communities – many of them located in the Midwest and the South – were tired of being treated like 'flyover country.' But by proposing the elimination of Amtrak's long distance trains, the Trump Administration does them one worse, cutting a vital service that connects these small town economies to the rest of the U.S. These hard working, small town Americans don't have airports or Uber to turn to; they *depend* on these trains."

Here's where ideological purity runs headlong into practical politics. For now, Trump has chosen the former, which is strange considering that he ran as a non-ideological kind of conservative.

Voters in rural areas – especially Appalachia – were convinced that Trump would look out for their interests in a way that his opponent would not have. And yet:

n Trump's budget eliminates the federal agency that has helped pay for infrastructure critical to building a new economy in rural areas – the Economic Development Administration.

n Trump's budget is especially harsh toward Appalachia. It would eliminate the federal agency specifically designed to help pay for economic development infrastructure there – the Appalachian Regional Commission.

n It reduces the funding for the one thing that Trump said he would support – research into clean coal technology that is trying to save the coal industry by scrubbing out the carbon emissions.

n And now it tries to eliminate the only mass transportation that many of those small communities have ready access to.

These do not seem the actions of someone who wants to make rural America great again.

The Cardinal passes through 11 states on its way from New York to Chicago; Trump carried seven of those. The train makes 32 station stops, 19 of those in communities that Trump won. One of those is Clifton Forge, which votes as part of Alleghany County. The county barely went for the Republican nominees in 2008 and 2012 but threw in its lot heavily for Trump in 2016, giving him 66 percent of the vote.

Did those voters imagine that he would reward them by cutting their economic development agencies and their Amtrak service so that the money could be used to pay for charter schools – which will mostly be in metro areas?

Perhaps eliminating funding for The Cardinal and other long-distance Amtrak routes is a cold-eyed, bottom-line reckoning about what government should and should not do – social consequences be damned. But if you look at it through the eyes of rural communities, shutting down The Cardinal seems to be, ahem, a cardinal sin.

THE ROANOKE TIMES
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 19, 2017
By Dwayne Yancey

Grounded

Here's another unusual way that President Trump is rewarding some of the communities that gave him such strong support: He wants to eliminate commercial air service to much of rural America.

Near us, that means the commercial flights serving the Shenandoah Valley Regional Airport at Weyers Cave and the Greenbrier Valley Airport at Lewisburg, West Virginia.

True, Trump's proposed budget doesn't specifically say there won't be commercial flights to Weyers Cave and Lewisburg – but it does eliminate the federal program that makes them possible, so it's really a distinction without a difference.

What's at issue here is an obscure government program that makes a big difference in many small communities across the country.

The Essential Air Service program was part of the grand bargain that led to airline deregulation in 1978. Airlines got "almost total freedom" – in the words of the U.S. Department of Transportation – to decide which markets to serve and what fares to charge. The airlines were clearly the winners in that arrangement; the losers were small communities whose flights weren't nearly as profitable.

To protect those communities, the federal government created the Essential Air Service program – which subsidizes "a minimal level of scheduled air service." This program was intended to end after ten years, but remains in place nearly 40 years later, for all the obvious reasons. It's hard to get rid of any government program – and Congress certainly isn't keen on the political (and economic) repercussions of effectively ending commercial air service to lots of communities.

The program currently costs $175 million and serves 115 airports in the lower 48 states (plus 60 in Alaska, where air travel is often the only way to travel). In Virginia, the only airport covered by the program is the one at Weyers Cave. Next door in West Virginia, five airports are covered – Beckley, Clarksburg/Fairmont, Lewisburg, Morgantown and Parkersburg.

Because the program is a subsidy, it's always drawn a skeptical eye from those who don't think the federal government should be subsidizing much of anything. From time to time, those skeptics call attention to certain subsidized airports that are pretty close to larger ones and ask whether we should just let those smaller airports go. If the 20,000 passengers each year at the Shenandoah Valley Regional Airport aren't enough to support commercial air service, well, that's just the way the free market is. Let them go to Charlottesville. Or Roanoke. Or Dulles. Or let the state subsidize it if it's so important.

That kind of cold-eyed, bottom-line ideological purity, though, runs headlong into the practicalities of local economies. Airports are convenient for leisure travelers, but essential for the business community – and economic development. Hence the first word of "Essential Air Service." The program has historically survived because the members of Congress who are most naturally inclined toward cutting federal spending – Republicans – are also the ones who represent most of the communities where these subsidized airports are. They'd hear from their business communities – one of their natural constituencies – if they pulled their air service subsidies.

One of the big problems Roanoke has when it comes to competing for economic development prospects is air service. Businesses complain there aren't enough direct flights to the places their people need to go. Now imagine the challenge of, say, the Shenandoah Valley Regional Airport, where you have just one option: Do you want to fly to Charlotte, or do you want to fly to Charlotte?

That's what makes Trump's decision to zero out Essential Air Service so curious. These subsidized airports are overwhelmingly in communities he won – and won big. He took nearly 72 percent in Augusta County, where Weyers Cave is. He took 68 percent in Greenbrier County. West Virginia, in fact, was his best state. So why does he want to shut down air service to five of the state's airports?

This proposal is of a piece with other items in Trump's budget – or rather, not in his budget. He wants to cut Amtrak's long-distance routes – which would mean an end to the train that runs through Clifton Forge, and half the trains through Lynchburg. He wants to eliminate the agency that provides funding for economic development infrastructure in rural (and inner-city) America – the Economic Development Administration. He wants to eliminate the agency specifically charged with economic development in Appalachia – the Appalachian Regional Commission.

If you're in Alleghany County, Virginia, you're triply out of luck – no Amtrak, no economic development funding from either of the two agencies you could have turned to. If you're in Greenbrier County, West Virginia – no commercial air service, no economic development funding, either.

If you're in Beckley, West Virginia, you're out of luck four ways – no Amtrak, no commercial air service, and no access to ARC or the EDA. Make that five ways: Trump promised to invest in clean coal research, but his budget reduces federal funding for the technology that really could help save some coal jobs. Or six ways: Trump also zeroes out the program that turns abandoned mine sites into marketable industrial sites. Yet Raleigh County gave more than 74 percent of its votes to Trump.

Why is Trump hurting the very localities that backed him so strongly? This is not the platform he ran on. It is, however, the platform of The Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank whose budget blueprint he has adopted as his own.

Trump never came to any of these localities and said that making America great would involve shutting down their air service or train service and pulling their economic development funds. He did say he would cut federal spending, without really saying how. Yet Trump's budget doesn't really cut spending. His overall budget is actually a little higher than the present one – it just rearranges priorities. More money for the military, the border wall, and charter schools, and less or sometimes no money for almost everything else. So don't think cutting these air subsidies will somehow help the federal deficit. It won't.

It just makes it harder for those localities to attract jobs.

THE ROANOKE TIMES
FRIDAY, APRIL 21, 2017
By Dwayne Yancey

They don't get it

President Trump's budget director gave a remarkable interview last week on the CNBC network. It's remarkable because of what Mick Mulvaney had to say about the decision to eliminate funding for the Appalachian Regional Commission, the federal agency that helps pay for a lot of economic development infrastructure in the region.

Appalachia supported Trump more strongly that almost any other part of the country. That region has been trending Republican for years, but in many counties, Trump ran stronger than any Republican ever. Why would Trump turn around and take away economic development funding from the localities that helped most?

That was exactly the question that interviewer John Harwood posed. To which Mulvaney replied: "My guess is he probably didn't know what the Appalachian Regional Commission did."

Then Mulvaney went on: "I think I was able to convince him, Mr. President, this is not an efficient use of the taxpayer dollars. That is not the best way to help the people in West Virginia." (Or, presumably, anywhere in Appalachia, the official designation of which includes 25 counties and eight cities in Virginia.)

So what is the best way to help those areas? Mulvaney said Trump's view is: "The best thing I can do for those folks whether or not they voted for me is to figure out how to get 3.5 percent economic growth."

Let's examine that statement, because it really shows that Trump's budget director – and maybe Trump himself – have no clue how to create jobs in Appalachia, or anywhere else in rural America.

First, let's start with the worthy goal of 3.5 percent economic growth. That is certainly a prerequisite for economic growth in rural America. If the national economy is going poorly, the economy in rural areas will be even worse. But – here's the key point – does 3.5 percent economic growth nationally guarantee growth in rural areas? Of course not. We only have centuries of history that proves that.

The anguish of rural areas is that economic growth is not evenly distributed. Put bluntly, the rich – in this case, metro areas – get richer, and poor areas, well, some limp along with much slower growth, and some actually get poorer. The whole point of the Appalachian Regional Commission – and a related agency, the Economic Development Administration, which serves rural areas and inner cities nationwide – is to help change that.

Mulvaney and Trump are basically saying to rural areas – hey, you're on your own, 3.5 percent economic growth will fix all your problems. No, it won't. It hasn't before; why would it now when the economy is in transition in ways that specifically disadvantage rural areas?

Let's look at some specifics. We'll even quote a Republican congressman – a Freedom Caucus Republican, in fact, that being Rep. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem. Griffith points to Dickenson County, in Virginia's coalfields. The county is so rugged that it only had two sites suitable for any large-scale development. However, it had to use one of them to build a new high school. Ironically, one reason it had to build a new high school was that, with the collapse of the coal economy and the exodus of young families to find work elsewhere, it could no longer afford to operate the three small high schools it had previously.

A national economy growing at 3.5 percent each year is not going to magically rain down riches on Dickenson County, not when there's just one site available for development. That's one reason why Griffith has backed expanding the Abandoned Mine Land program, which helps convert old mine sites into marketable economic development sites. Right now, that program just covers West Virginia, Kentucky and Pennsylvania. He and others have wanted to expand it to include Virginia and other coal states. But what does Mulvaney's budget – Trump's budget – do to that program? It eliminates that, as well.

How, exactly, does that help bring economic growth to Dickenson County?

Another problem that rural areas everywhere – be they in Appalachia or elsewhere – is that the workers often don't have the skills the modern economy requires. That's a problem everywhere, actually, including the Roanoke Valley, but it's more accentuated in rural areas. Economic growth of 3.5 percent isn't going to bring growth to rural areas unless there's a workforce there capable of doing the jobs the new economy is creating. How to train that workforce? Well, at Mountain Empire Community College, there's now a program to train students to operate drones. At University of Virginia's College at Wise, Mountain Empire Community College and Southwest Virginia Community College, there are programs to train students in cybersecurity. Both of those are intended to help position Virginia's coalfields to attract technology jobs. Guess who helps pay for those programs? The Appalachian Regional Commission.

Take that funding away, and what happens to those programs? The state's unlikely to fund them; state government barely recognizes anything outside the urban crescent these days. The local governments? They can barely fund their K-12 school systems, which once depended on coal severance taxes that now have nearly dried up. Yet, under Mulvaney's logic, 3.5 percent economic growth will somehow take care of things. This is magical thinking. It is certainly not the thinking of someone who understands how the economy actually works. It is, though, the product of inside-the-Beltway theorists, whose conservative ideologues are just as out-of-touch with the reality of rural America as their liberal counterparts are.

The Appalachian Regional Commission is simply a metaphor for a whole range of rural-related economic development programs that Trump wants to eliminate.

The Economic Development Administration? It's helped jump-start a technology hub in Southwest Virginia by funding the initial development of the Virginia Tech Corporate Research Center and paid the biggest share of Floyd County's "innovation center" that hopes to attract high-tech start-ups. But Trump zeroes it out.

The Essential Air Service program guarantees commercial air service to small airports (including one in Virginia and five in West Virginia) – a luxury for leisure passengers but essential for businesses that locate in rural areas. Gone.

That clean coal technology Trump promised to invest in? Not happening.

Making America great again apparently doesn't include rural America.