



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2018 Entry Form

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May 4, 2018

To the Judges:

A newspaper's highest calling is to make a difference, to compel change where otherwise cultures of corruption, decline or simple indifference would have prevailed.

We answer this calling not by issuing legislative mandates or authoritative orders or

even by way of rhetorical brow-beating. Rather, we answer this calling through the sheer power of the facts, gathered relentlessly and presented in their most essential form, unadorned and without hyperbole.

This approach forms the marrow of our community service. We seek to know and understand in depth the places we serve and the subjects on which we report. We seek to convey what we've learned in clear, precise detail to further the understanding of our audience. And we seek in our editorial columns to persuade, not by telling our audience what to think but by supplying them with the power of the facts, presented in a manner that enlightens as well as inspires.

In every sense, Dwayne Yancey fulfills and epitomizes The Roanoke Times' objectives for community service through editorial leadership. A veteran of more than 30 years at The Roanoke Times, a gifted writer and a fount of institutional knowledge, Dwayne is first and foremost a journalist. Driven by an innate and insatiable curiosity, he is a tireless pursuer of the facts. He has applied this approach and the natural spirit of a reporter to his position as editorial page editor, and the results have been dramatic.

Two years after his editorials helped save Sweet Briar College from permanent closure, Dwayne set his sights in 2017 on the coalfields of Southwest Virginia, an area long forgotten in the political sweep of things.

Devastated by coal's demise and left behind amid the continued political rise of Northern Virginia, the coalfields have been robbed of everything but a tenuous existence on the edge of one of America's wealthiest states. Mines closed, schools shuttered and no one outside of those most affected noticed, so much so that Yancey mused in an editorial about the prospect of rural America taking the place of inner cities on society's fringes.

In the pages that follow are editorials that were only part of the constant drumbeat in our opinion pages about this forgotten region, a place far beyond our circulation area and far beyond the consideration of much of the world outside it. As Dwayne continually pounded the subject, lawmakers began stirring to life, making proposals to boost education funding and revive the economy. Democratic gubernatorial candidate Ralph Northam, the eventual election winner, proposed an expansion of a University of Virginia campus in the coalfields. Little or none of this would have happened without Dwayne's persistent pressure.

To be sure, there is much work to be done, but as a trio of Republican lawmakers noted: "The Roanoke Times ... performed an important public service in sparking a conversation about the future" of the region.

Dwayne represents to the fullest the vision The Roanoke Times strives to provide not only throughout its market but to the larger community across the state of Virginia. It's for people like Dwayne that the award in Carmage Walls' name was established. He is a leader in every sense, active, caring and dedicated. We are proud to have Dwayne carrying our editorial banner. We are sure the late, great Mr. Walls would be

equally so.

Lee Wolverton
Managing Editor
The Roanoke Times



DWAYNE YANCEY
**Voice of
the unheard**

THE ROANOKE TIMES
THE CARMAGE WALLS COMMENTARY PRIZE

THE ROANOKE TIMES

201 W. CAMPBELL AVE., ROANOKE, VA 24010-2491

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Lee Wolverson
Managing Editor
The Roanoke Times



Dwayne Yancey

For more than 30 years, Dwayne Yancey's wit, wisdom and insatiable curiosity have been mainstays at The Roanoke Times, as much a part of the place as mailroom bundles and newsroom chatter. He joined the newspaper in 1982, spending six years as a political reporter and seven as an assistant managing editor. A 1979 graduate of James Madison University, Yancey authored a book on Doug Wilder, the son of an insurance salesman who worked his way through law school and went on to become the first African-American in U.S. history to be elected governor. Yancey's experience, prolific writing talent, institutional knowledge and relentless curiosity made him a natural editorial page editor. In his spare time, he's an accomplished playwright whose work has been performed in venues across America. Yancey and his wife have a son and a daughter. The couple reside in Fincastle.



VOICE OF THE UNHEARD

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WEDNESDAY, MAY 10, 2017

Time to get vocal

We do not normally fashion ourselves as trouble-makers. We prefer to lower our voices while others are raising theirs. Come, let us reason together.

However, it may be time to make an exception. More specifically, it may be time for those most interested in Southwest Virginia – especially the coal counties – to start being more of a disruptive force in Virginia politics.

We’ve bemoaned a litany of grievances before: When coal counties found themselves facing an unprecedented funding crisis earlier this year – brought on by the collapse of the coal economy – the state’s Democratic governor offered nothing except empty words.

When one state legislator, Del. Nick Rush, R-Christiansburg, came up with a temporary solution, Republican-led budget negotiators tweaked that formula to still leave some counties with nothing.

It’s hard to avoid coming to the conclusion that neither party in Richmond is really all that interested in the economic fate of Southwest Virginia. But wait, there’s more:

Of the five current candidates for governor, there’s really only one – Republican Frank Wagner – who lays out a specific plan for the economy of Southwest Virginia. He’d raise the gas tax to build lots of roads, from widening Interstate 81 to getting started on Interstate 73 and the Coalfields Expressway. (News flash: He’s also unlikely to win the nomination.)

Instead, this is a more typical response: When a questioner at the recent Democratic debate in Roanoke asked about “far Southwest Virginia,” the candidates turned the answer to a more general answer about “rural Virginia” – not exactly the same thing.

Finally, when the Southwest Virginia Technology Council invited the candidates on both sides to debate before the June 13 primary in the coalfields – specifically to address issues there – the response was mostly silence.

Granted, the council extended its invitation after both parties had set their pre-primary debate schedule, but if the Northern Virginia Technology Council had made the same offer, we suspect the candidates would have found it possible to re-jigger their schedule.

All this, of course, comes against a backdrop of an ongoing demographic crisis in the coalfields: People are moving out at a rate not seen anywhere else in the state.

In most rural counties in Virginia, the majority of the population decline is attributable the aging of the population – deaths outnumber births. Some rural counties actually have more people moving in than moving out, just not enough to make up for the deaths/births deficit.

In Virginia’s coal counties, though, the population decline is overwhelmingly driven by people moving out in search of work. Jack Kennedy, the Democratic clerk of court for Wise County, even has a phrase for these people. “America’s first climate refugees,” he calls them, a phrase potent enough to discomfit partisans on both sides.

Since 2010, Buchanan County has seen the largest percentage drop of any locality in the state – down 6.7 percent. Nearly 73 percent of that decline is due to people moving

out, not dying. Dickenson County next door has the second-biggest rate of population decline with a drop of 5.7 percent. There, out-migration accounts for 75 percent of the county’s population loss. In Wise County, people moving out accounts for 81 percent of the county’s population decline. Why is this not a crisis that candidates are talking about?

Perhaps it’s time for people in Southwest Virginia – especially the coal counties – to be a lot more vocal if they want to get Richmond’s attention.

Here’s an idea: It’s time to start making these candidates uncomfortable.

Two years ago when Sweet Briar College’s board wanted to shut down the school, alumnae tried to get Attorney General Mark Herring to intervene to enforce the will of the school’s founder, which called for the college to be “a perpetual memorial.” When Herring initially distanced himself from the controversy, some alumnae took to shadowing the attorney general at his public appearances – waving signs and generally causing a ruckus that couldn’t be ignored. Eventually, Herring did get involved by calling in a mediator – and Sweet Briar College remains open today, thank you very much. (The school’s endowment was never really the problem; the problem was that its old board simply lost faith in its mission.)

Perhaps community leaders in the coal counties should follow the example set by those activist Sweet Briar alumnae. They could even turn that exodus of workers to their advantage because that means they now have potential advocates scattered across the state. Maybe some of “America’s first climate refugees” should start showing up at appearances by the gubernatorial candidates wherever they are – and try to force them to address the economy in the coal counties.

We’ll even offer up some ideas for signs, playing off the names of communities there. “When will (insert candidate name) Wise up?” “Will we see you Monday in Grundy?” Or, for those of a particular bent, “Make Appalachia Great Again.”

Laugh if you want. Admittedly, there’s a certain level of silliness in the slogans, but a deadly seriousness behind the purpose: To force our next governor, whomever he may be, to focus on the coalfields and talk about the economy there. Democrats Northam and Perriello spend time talking about rural Virginia in general – and the need to get more students into workforce training programs at community colleges. Republican Ed Gillespie gives a good conservative account of how his proposed tax cut will rejuvenate the economy across the state. All those might be good ideas, but they are not specific to the coalfields. If a Southwest Virginia county wanted to tear down a Confederate statue, perhaps even Corey Stewart might pay attention.

To be fair, Gillespie has told the Southwest Virginia Technology Council he’d accept an invitation to debate his Democratic opponent in the coalfields this fall if he’s the Republican nominee (which he probably will be). Ideally, all the candidates would commit themselves to at least that minimal level of conversation.

If not, we know some Sweet Briar alumnae who could probably offer some advice to America’s first climate refugees on how to get a politician’s attention.

SUNDAY, JUNE 25, 2017

Should America just write off Appalachia?

First of a two-part series.

Here's an uncomfortable question: Instead of trying to build a new economy in Appalachia, should we simply depopulate the place?

Mind you, that's not a position we're advocating. It does, however, make for a sobering thought experiment — one that has some important policy implications.

Here's who got us thinking about this: A friendly fellow named Lyman Stone who issues some dire warnings. By day, he's a cotton economist in Washington, concerned with the ups and downs of the global cotton trade. On the side, he runs a website called *In A State of Migration*, which tracks migration trends around the world. A native of Kentucky, he writes a lot about Appalachia. One of his posts — laden with charts and graphs and maps — shows population trends in Appalachia.

The basic point: Westward settlement mostly bypassed Appalachia, likely for the obvious topographic reasons. From 1800 to 1870, what he calls “the classic core of Appalachia — West Virginia, eastern Kentucky and Southwest Virginia — was mostly empty.

Then something happened. Coal happened. Railroads happened. People — many of them immigrants — poured into Appalachia. Roanoke was not the only boom town to spring up then. So did lots of other communities deeper in coal country.

Between 1870 and 1890, the population of many counties in Southwest Virginia (we'll just focus on our part of Appalachia) nearly doubled. Over the 20 years after that — between 1890 and 1910 — many nearly doubled again. Wise County's population more than tripled. From 4,785 in 1870 and 9,345 in 1890, Wise County's population surged to 34,162 in 1910. The coal boom wasn't over yet. By 1950 — the year most coal counties in Virginia peaked — Wise County topped out at 56,336. West of the Blue Ridge, only Roanoke was bigger.

Put another way, Appalachia was where the jobs were. Now it's not.

First, coal-mining became more mechanized. People started moving out decades ago, long before the demand for coal dropped. The collapse of the coal economy has only accelerated that population exodus.

All but one of Virginia's coal counties is smaller than it was in 1950, sometimes dramatically so. Wise County's population is down to 39,501 — about 30 percent lower than it was at its height. Buchanan and Dickenson Counties are down by 36 percent. And their populations will surely continue to decrease for two reasons, one economic, one demographic.

The economic reason: Last year marked the first time that coal was not the nation's biggest energy source; natural gas surpassed it. Coal will not come back in any appreciable way. The demand of metallurgical coal — used in steel-making — may rebound some, depending on the economy. However, when utilities make decisions on new power plants, they're looking decades ahead. They are putting their money into natural gas — hence, Dominion Energy's interest in the Atlantic Coast Pipeline — and, to a lesser extent, renewables such as wind and solar. You can't simply flick a switch and turn coal back on.

The demographic reason why coal counties will continue to lose population: It's young adults who are leaving. Rural areas in general are getting older, but Appalachian counties even more so. The median age in Buchanan County is now 45.7. For comparison purposes, in Montgomery County, it's 28.5. There is not going to be a baby boom in the coalfields — so all these counties will simply get older and older, which means another way they lose population: Deaths outnumber births. All that's old news, of course, just a backdrop for getting to this question: How much lower will Appalachia's population drop? And should we really try to stop that?

“The histories do suggest that attempts to maintain Appalachian population levels face serious headwinds,” Stone says. “It was a seriously underpopulated area relative to its neighbors for a century or more, until coal mining began. Coal mining is the sole, exclusive reason why Appalachia's population boomed.”

Without coal (or with only small amounts of coal mining), what size population can Appalachia really support? That's how an economist like Stone looks at it.

“It's hard to see what industries exist in which Appalachia has a comparative advantage as vast as it had in coal,” he writes. “I'm not saying none do or could ever exist; I'm just saying that if they can or do, they don't seem extremely clear right now.”

So what is Appalachia's economic future? There are certainly efforts to change the equation. Wise County is now rich with broadband Internet — thanks in part to investments by the state's tobacco commission — and is now making a play for data centers. It's already landed one. The University of Virginia's College at Wise and the community college there are training students for drones and cybersecurity. There are similar efforts in eastern Kentucky to create what some are calling “Silicon Hollow.”

On the other hand, Appalachia is a lot bigger than just one forward-thinking county. And President Trump's proposed budget zeroes out funding for the Appalachian Regional Commission, the federal agency that makes a lot of that training possible. It also zeroes out funding for the program that converts abandoned mine sites into marketable industrial sites.

Trump has lifted environmental regulations on coal. This helps the coal economy in the short term, but does nothing to change its long-term trajectory in the marketplace. Meanwhile, he is trying to take away the few tools that Appalachia does have to remake its economy. Even with those tools, though, the challenge to create an economy to match its existing population is daunting.

Stone puts it in clinical terms: “The market equilibrium for Appalachian population may be even lower than the levels we see today. I know this will cause deep sadness for locals who long for recovery; and as someone who genuinely loves Appalachia, it does for me too. But we can't let hopes blind us to realities. On some level, population must be associated with economic activity to support it. Coal mining is still declining, and when it's completely gone, it's not clear how much economic activity will remain, and therefore how much population can be sustained.”

Would either of our candidates for governor like to talk about this?

Coming Monday: What would it take to halt Appalachia's population decline?

MONDAY, JUNE 26, 2017

Barefoot and pregnant

Second of a two-part series.

What would it take to reverse the depopulation of Appalachia, which has been a slow-moving crisis in our midst?

Well, a new economy would certainly help. But that alone would not stem the population decline in rural Virginia, most especially in the coal counties where population losses have been the steepest.

That's because they face both an economic and a demographic crisis. The two are related — as the coal economy collapses, people are moving out in search of jobs elsewhere. More specifically, young people are moving out.

Business and political leaders (and even editorial writers) focus a lot on the economic part of that equation. To fully grasp the enormity of the problem facing the coal counties of Southwest Virginia, we need to look at the demographic side of that equation. A few years ago, Hamilton Lombard, a demographer from the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, attended a conference in the coalfields. Community leaders there were trying to assess the impact of the Coalfields Expressway, a proposed highway that would run through Wise, Dickenson and Buchanan counties and eventually connect to Interstate 77 in West Virginia.

The expressway — whose latest price tag is put at \$5.1 billion — is often described as a project that would bring new economic life to the coalfields. Lombard had to tell the community leaders they were wrong. "It was hard," Lombard says, "to convince them that the expressway would only likely slow population loss rather than by itself generate a boom in growth." The expressway might be a good thing, but a new road, by itself, isn't going to reverse some inexorable demographic trends.

Why? The reason lies in some astounding statistics.

The basic problem is that as young adults leave the coalfields (or any other locality, for that matter), the population tilts older and older. The coal counties now have some of the oldest median ages in the state (the very oldest are in counties along the Chesapeake Bay, which have become big retirement communities).

That means something else: In most localities in Southwest Virginia, more people are dying than being born. In 2015, there were about 1,800 babies born in Virginia's coalfields. But about 2,400 people died.

Furthermore, the number of deaths is only going to accelerate in coming years, because there are bigger age cohorts moving into their senior years. Meanwhile, the number of births is probably going to fall, because there are fewer young adults left to have babies.

Lombard computes that over the next decade, the number of people dying each year in the coalfields should rise to between 3,000 and 3,500 a year — while the number of babies born will fall to about 1,700 per year. If the exodus of young adults accelerates as jobs become even scarcer, then that 1,700 figure will fall, as well.

That means right now the coalfields' population declines by about 600 people a year just through the natural process of deaths and births — even if nobody moves out.

And that annual deficit is likely to increase to 1,300 to 1,800 per year — again, even if nobody moves out. That's a lot of people to make up.

So what would it take to keep the population of the coal counties even? To stop the population losses entirely? Hold onto your seat.

Here's what Lombard calculates: "To replace every death with a birth, the birth rate would have to nearly double. Right now the coalfields have a total fertility rate of 2 births per mother . . . To replace every likely death in the next decade, the region's fertility rate would need to rise to above 3.5 or maybe 4 children per mother. That would be equivalent of the 1950s baby boom and would need to be sustained for much longer than the baby boom lasted."

So think about that: To halt the population decline of the coal counties, we'd first persuade people to stop moving out. But then the women of the coal counties would have to be kept, if not barefoot and pregnant, at least pregnant.

And if we can't keep people from moving out of the coal counties, then the birth rate would have to be even higher. That's just not going to happen. So are the coal counties simply doomed to suffer population losses for decades to come? Demographically speaking, yes. Even if we build the Coalfields Expressway. Even if we do lots of other things.

There is another solution, one that could repopulate the coalfields. It's a policy that's been proven to work elsewhere, but isn't likely to be very popular in Southwest Virginia. Still, we'll mention it anyway: Immigration.

One of the great ironies of our current political situation is that anti-immigration sentiment runs highest in rural areas, yet it's rural areas that logically should be the loudest champions for increased immigration.

The United States is not Canada — a little matter in 1776 made sure of that — but there are some things we might learn from our northern neighbor. Rural Canada faces the same demographic pressures that rural America does, yet some Canadian communities have responded very differently.

Consider the case of Cape Breton, the northernmost part of Nova Scotia. It looks and feels a lot like Southwest Virginia — mountainous, with an economy that was once based on coal. Now the coal mines are shut down, and the population is declining. Sound familiar? The problem does but the solution doesn't: Community leaders there are actively encouraging immigrants to settle in Cape Breton — and the leadership complains when their provincial and federal governments don't do enough to direct immigrants there.

Not just Cape Breton either. The Calgary Herald recently looked at two small towns in what it called Manitoba's "Bible Belt": "In 2011, Winkler's population stood at 10,700; Morden's was 7,800. Both cities and the surrounding region have grown by more than 3,000 people since, thanks to immigration programs that have drawn people from all over the world." The Herald said the two towns were now economically "booming," as employers are enticed there by the larger talent pool of workers. Canadians see more clearly than Americans that immigrants drive the economy, not slow it down. So what would it take to reverse the demographic collapse in the coalfields? A baby boom would help. So would increased immigration. Without one or both of those, the coalfields will continue to die, quite literally.

THURSDAY, JUNE 29, 2017

Turn unused schools into tax-free zones

In Dickenson County, the big controversy is over what to do with one of the county's three unused schools.

It is a controversy complicated by memories, passions and the intentions that now run back nearly a century. One particular building was founded as the "Dickenson County Memorial, Industrial and High School" and was dedicated as a memorial to the 16 men from the county who gave their lives in World War I.

From a distance, we wonder: Why doesn't this building fall into the same category as the disputed Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville? Virginia has a law that makes it unlawful "to disturb or interfere" with war memorials. Charlottesville has argued that the Lee statue isn't a war memorial, simply a statue of Lee, but a judge has issued a six-month injunction anyway so the issue can be litigated. There's no question here about whether this building in Clintwood is a memorial; the General Assembly itself declared it as such in 1920.

We wonder something else: Perhaps this controversy is actually a blessing because it calls our attention to a potential opportunity — not just in Dickenson County, but all across Southwest Virginia.

Virginia's coal counties are losing population at an alarming rate, as the coal economy collapses. Here's how that demographic collapse plays out: Schools close. Since 1989, 13 high schools there have closed, most in the past six years. That jinxed number "13" doesn't even begin to count all the elementary and middle schools, either. In May, Wise County was forced to shut down Appalachia Elementary. There will be others. Russell County has set in motion the closing of Givens Elementary. The Tazewell County School Board has been monitoring the falling enrollments of some of its smaller elementary schools. "They're on the chopping block," says Superintendent George Brown. "Their future will be determined this year."

Demography is a cruel but predictable science: Populations in the coal counties will continue to drop, unless something happens to turn around the economies there, and that something will have to be dramatic. Deaths now outnumber births, and the number of births will fall as young adults move away in search of work. Virginia is witnessing the slow depopulation of an entire region, and doing little to nothing towards stopping it.

That brings us back to the former Dickenson County Memorial, Industrial and High School (more recently an annex of Clintwood High School, which closed in 2015) and all the other abandoned schools across the coal counties. Many former schools get repurposed, typically as community centers. Those are off the table. But many others simply sit vacant. What if we didn't look on them as liabilities and eyesores, sad reminders of what once was and will never be again? What if we considered them assets?

An urban-dominated state government in Richmond has made it painfully clear that it doesn't intend to help the coal counties any more than absolutely necessary, and even that support is often in question. One former legislator tells us that when he was in the General Assembly, his colleagues in the urban crescent took the attitude "why

bother?"

Here's something the General Assembly could do, though, that wouldn't cost Virginia a dime: It could declare each of these old schools a tax-free zone.

The fantasy would be if, say, Google decided to take advantage of a tax-free building in Clintwood or Haysi or Pound or Ewing or Appalachia or wherever to locate several hundred software engineers. More realistically, could the prospect of a tax-free location help lure other entrepreneurs? Any entrepreneurs?

We don't just mean rent-free here, we mean tax-free. Any business operating out of one of these old schools wouldn't have to pay any state taxes. None. Right now, the state is collecting zero dollars off them anyway, so what would the state have to lose? Not a thing. It actually would gain a little something. If this tax-free gambit worked, then the coal counties would attract some entrepreneurs who would generate economic activity in the counties that need it most. And all that new economic activity — real estate sales, groceries, gas, you name it — would get taxed as usual. Everybody comes out ahead.

Yes, yes, write the rules so we're not cannibalizing businesses from somewhere else in the state. We're proposing a concept here, not every jot of potential legislation. Write the law to apply to any locality where the population is declining. That would bring in a lot of other rural localities, too. Write it so that the tax-free offer expires after, say, five years. The point is: Radical solutions are needed to turn around the hardest-hit economies in rural Virginia. This one just seems remarkably easy to accomplish because it doesn't cost anything.

Many of these buildings are still in good shape. The recently-closed Appalachia Elementary was only built in 1976. Brown, the Tazewell superintendent, points out that even some of the older buildings are sturdily built. They come with parking lots. The high schools generally also had rooms for career and technical education — meaning they might be easily adaptable for small manufacturing facilities.

The biggest technical obstacle for many of these old Southwest schools is the lack of broadband. Haysi High School is one of three schools that sits vacant in Dickenson County — a co-working space just waiting to happen, except for one thing. The latest State of the Internet Report produced by a Massachusetts cloud computing firm measures the Internet speeds in Haysi at 2.2 megabits per second. That's slower than almost any other place in the world. Namibia is faster. Bolivia is faster. Nobody who depends on Internet service is going to set up shop in Haysi. Maybe state government is fine with parts of the state having Third World infrastructure — it sure seems to be so far. So, yes, the state ought to put up some money to extend broadband to these old schools. Still, that seems a small price to pay.

And consider the potential payoff: What if the prospect of a tax-free location — with state-of-the-art broadband — could jump-start some new businesses in even just one of these coalfield communities?

There's only one way to find out. We also have two candidates for governor who could endorse this if they wanted.

Do they?

MONDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2017

Exhibit A for disparity?

Virginia's business community is not populated by social justice warriors, and an economic report is not usually considered a manifesto.

However, a report produced by one of the state's GO Virginia economic development councils raises a provocative question: Is Virginia's system of school funding constitutional?

To be fair, that's not exactly what the report says, but, unintentionally or otherwise, it does point in that direction. Let's explain.

The GO Virginia state board has divided Virginia into nine regions, each of which has produced a report on the regional economy. The best thing about them is they are not documents written by community cheerleaders. Instead, some of them ask some pretty difficult — but perhaps necessary — questions that communities need to resolve before they can try to build a new economy.

The reports for the state's two most economically-distressed regions — Southwest and Southside — are particularly blunt. The Southwest report warns that an exodus of young adults makes it hard to not just recruit new employers, but hold onto the ones already there. We've looked at that one before.

Today, we'll look at the Southside report, which basically suggests the public schools there aren't any good. That is obviously not a Chamber of Commerce kind of question to ask — at least in public — but it's one that came up repeatedly in a series of “stakeholder” meetings that the Southside council held earlier this year. Here's a sampling:

From “community leaders”: “There is a lack of historic public commitment to education and a lack of parental expectations that education is important, which results in challenges to create competitive schools . . .

”From “large employers”: “There is a perception that the school systems are not producing good talent; does this reflect lack of leadership from local elected officials, unwilling to invest in K-12?”

From “small business” owners: “There are vestiges of Massive Resistance and other racially-divisive actions are still evident, particularly as seen in lack of support for public schools.”

In each of the nine GO Virginia reports, the biggest obstacle to economic growth was identified as a lack of trained workers. However, no other region focused as much on the perceived deficiencies of the public schools as did the report on Southside.

This seems . . . noteworthy.

Keep in mind that these councils are dominated by business leaders, motivated by cold-eyed, bottom-line questions. When various education groups say schools are under-funded, well, they may be right, but that's also easy to dismiss this complaint as exactly what you'd think they'd say. But when a 337-page report set in motion by the state's business community says the same thing, perhaps it's time to pay attention, eh?

The interesting thing that runs through these comments is that they all raise the question of whether the schools in Southside are supported by their communities. That's an important nuance. It's not saying the teachers are failures; it's saying they're

not well supported.

The comments suggest that lack of support comes in two forms. The first is “a lack of parental expectations that education is important.” If parents aren't supportive, then no amount of funding is going to achieve the desired results. That's also something hard to measure. All the other comments about “lack of support” speak either directly or indirectly to a lack of funding for public schools. And that is something that can be measured.

In Virginia, school funding comes from three sources — local, state and federal funding. The amounts vary, according to a complex formula. Generally speaking, the poorer a community is, the more state and federal funding it gets on the very correct theory that there's less local funding available.

That's the case in Southside, and across other parts of rural Virginia. On average, Virginia localities spent \$6,084 on each student in the 2015-2016 year, the most recent year for which data is available. In the 14 localities that fall in what GO Virginia defines as Southside, the average was \$2,817 — ranging from \$1,930 in Henry County to \$4,030 in Prince Edward County. For comparison purposes, the eight localities in far Southwest Virginia (encompassing the economically-distressed coalfields) spent even less on their public schools — averaging \$2,499.

It would be easy to say these localities aren't spending enough. However, these are also some of the state's poorest localities; how much can they realistically tax themselves?

Perhaps a better comparison is to look at the total funding, once the state and federal monies are factored in. By that measure, the state average is \$11,745 per student. In Southside, it's \$11,516 — below average, but not that much. The total spending on far Southwest schools is lower — \$9,950 per student.

Now, here's some more context: In parts of Northern Virginia, affluent localities are able to afford to spend a lot more of their own money — so the total school spending is nearly twice that in far Southwest and far higher than in Southside. Arlington, for instance, spends \$16,228 per student — nearly 12 times what Henry County spends. Arlington's total spending per student weighs in at \$19,323 per student, the highest in the state, while Henry comes in at \$9,777, one of the lowest figures in the state.

All this raises the question of what school spending ought to be. The state constitution requires that Virginia maintain public schools “of high quality.” However, the state Supreme Court ruled in 1994 that “nowhere does the Constitution require equal, or substantially equal, funding or programs” between school systems. It's up to the General Assembly, the court ruled, to decide what funding should be.

So here's maybe a better question. Let's not focus on the difference between what Arlington spends and what Henry County spends. Let's focus on what the Constitution requires. Does the \$11,516 being spent per student in Southside (or the \$9,950 in far Southwest) result in schools that meet the constitutionally-mandated standard of “high quality”?

The business community in Southside has just implied the schools there are not. If the courts were ever called upon to decide the definition of “high quality” and whether some school systems fail to meet it, this GO Virginia report might be Exhibit A for the plaintiffs.

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A moral debt

Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google do different things, but the tech giants all have the same goal (aside from, perhaps, world domination).

These energy-hungry companies all want to get 100 percent of their power from renewable sources.

They are all well on their way, too.

Amazon Web Services last year generated more than 40 percent of its power from renewable energy and is on pace to hit 50 percent by the end of this year. In Virginia alone, it's announced six different solar farms, all in rural counties that are mostly on the eastern side of the state — in Accomack, Buckingham, New Kent, Powhatan and Sussex counties. It's also installing solar panels on its fulfillment centers, which the company says will help provide 80 percent of the power there.

Facebook says renewables will provide 50 percent of the power to its data centers by the end of 2018.

Apple says it's already at 93 percent (although it apparently achieves the target by paying other companies to generate renewable energy as an offset to what it buys from coal-powered local utilities in some markets). Google says it will hit the 100 percent mark later this year.

You may notice we didn't mention Microsoft. That's because it's already there. The software giant says it became 100 percent renewable-powered in 2014.

The tech companies are sexy, of course, but they're not alone. There are 110 major companies who have pledged to use only renewable energy. Their target dates vary — Bank of America and Coca-Cola say they will be 100 percent renewable by 2020; eBay says it will hit that goal by 2025. General Motors is more cautious and sets a goal of 2050.

All this is good for the planet: Here are some of the biggest and fastest-growing companies in the world foreswearing carbon emissions.

It's also good for their bottom lines. In many markets, renewables are now cheaper than fossil fuels. What it's not good for, of course, is the fossil fuel industry — and, by extension, the communities that have grown up around fossil fuels. More to the point, it's not good for the coal communities of Appalachia.

For a long time now, we've been accustomed to hearing how Barack Obama and environmentalists were waging a "war on coal," and they certainly were. Here's the new reality, though: It's now the free market that is waging the war on coal, as more and more companies demand renewable energy — and these tech giants, in particular, have the muscle to make it happen. and Facebook made its recent decision to build a data center in Henrico County contingent on solar power. Amazon just finished taking bids for a second headquarters city. Amazon lists "sustainability" — a buzzword for renewables — as one of the criteria it will consider when it decides where to put a complex with a projected 50,000 jobs. You can bet than any governor who wants to lure Amazon to his or her state (or province) is calling up the local utility to see how many renewables it can bring online.

These green-minded companies — and the environmentalists cheering them on —

won't shed any tears for coal companies that go bankrupt. And we're not asking them to. Companies rise; companies fall. That's the nature of the free market. However, the communities that grew up around the coal industry are essentially collateral damage. They are the innocent victims here. All these tech companies are touting their social consciousness by advertising their commitment to renewables. How about some directing some of that social consciousness to the communities being put out of business by the demise of coal?

Let's put an even sharper point on things: It's no longer environmentalists or federal regulations killing coal. It's Apple, and Amazon, and the Bank of America, and Coca-Cola, and Facebook, and General Motors, and Google and all the rest. President Trump can pull out of the Paris Climate Accord and scrap the Clean Power Plan, but those are mostly symbolic actions at this point. Some of the best-known companies in the world have essentially adopted their own Clean Power Plans. Again, that's great for the planet. However, what social responsibility do these companies have to the coal communities left decimated by their very understandable and very commendable preference for green energy?

Amazon chief executive Jeff Bezos will soon start looking at his many suitors. We'd invite him — and Apple's Tim Cook, and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, and Google's Pichai Sundararajan and Microsoft's Bill Gates — to come take a look at Appalachia. We want them to see Buchanan County, which has lost 6.7 percent of its population since 2010 and by 2040 is expected to lose one-third of its population. We want them to see the schools that have closed. Since 1989, some 13 high schools have shut down and more are likely to, as people move away in search of jobs elsewhere. We want them to see the schools that remain open — and have to count how much paper they use because pennies are that tight.

In a way, some of that is on the tech giants, whether they realize it or not. They didn't cause the decline of coal, but they are helping accelerate it — and their very visible embrace of renewables puts them in the spotlight. Thought experiment: If the tech companies insisted on only burning coal, how different would things be? Yet the tech titans need not be the villains here. They could actually be the heroes — because they also have it within their power to remake the economy of Appalachia in a more positive way.

We don't expect Amazon to put its second headquarters in Grundy, or Clintwood or anywhere else in the coalfields. But they could put something else there. All these tech companies are building data centers. Amazon is building distribution centers. Why not make a deliberate point of putting some of those in Appalachia? They helped create Silicon Valley; they could help create Silicon Hollow, too. This is hardly an original thought; Del. Todd Pillion, R-Abingdon, made a similar proposal in an op-ed we ran last month.

We're not asking for charity. We're asking to make a business case. More specifically, we're asking these companies to consider a new criteria for their decision-making. All these companies talk about their social responsibilities — and saving the planet from runaway greenhouse gasses is certainly part of that. Why can't one of their social responsibilities complement a smart business decision about distribution or data centers in Southwest Virginia, thereby helping Appalachia rebuild an economy that they've helped wreck?

