

# W.Va. Businesses Split on Right-to-Work

By ROB ENGLE • FEB 19, 2016  
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It's been just over a week since members of the West Virginia Legislature voted to override Governor Tomblin's veto of the union-opposed Right-to-Work measure. But even now that the bill will become law, the business community is arguing over whether the legislation will actually improve West Virginia's economy.

Lowell Ferguson, the President and CEO of Nitro Electric, was a member of the Putnam County Chamber, a local chamber of commerce, until just a few weeks ago. That's when he pulled his membership because of the state level support of the Right-to-Work legislation.

"Where was our vote?" Ferguson said. "If the Chamber is going to take a position, don't you think they ought to be asking members of the chamber what their position is? They didn't ask anybody. So, if we pay dues to the local chamber, and the local chamber pays dues to the state chamber then we're in essence funding the legislation that we disagree with."

Ferguson opposes the measure and says he's not the only business owner in West Virginia to pull out of the Chamber of Commerce because of that opposition. He estimates twenty or so businesses have done the same.

Steve Roberts, President of the West Virginia Chamber of Commerce, disputed Ferguson's claims that businesses are pulling their memberships and that the organization didn't ask its members how they felt about the bill.

"I know some testimony was given at the Capitol that says businesses are leaving the chamber of Commerce. That has not been what we have experienced," Roberts said. "Our members overwhelmingly tell us that they believe passing Right-to-Work will be good for employment, good for the economy and help stimulate growth in West Virginia. So, it's fine that other people want to say those things. But, we're right here at the center of things, and our members overwhelmingly support the passing of Right-to-Work."

One such member is John Casey, owner Casey Construction in Ripley, West Virginia.

"I'm for Right-to-Work and when you say that, the first thing a lot of people think is you're anti-union, that couldn't be any further from the truth," Casey said. "I think when you're chasing the American dream, you shouldn't be forced to be a member of any organization, union or otherwise."

Casey, like many lawmakers, believes being a Right-to-Work state will draw businesses to West Virginia, creating more jobs for working West Virginians.

Ferguson, on the other hand, thinks the legislation can only hurt the state's economy, making it

more difficult for union shops to stay open.

“The companies that try to stay here and try to be union are going to become uncompetitive,” Ferguson said. “Companies like us that have been here for 55 years, our choice are basically to continue the fight in the private sector, or relocate the business to another state.”

Roberts says with the way things are going economically in West Virginia, it’s time to try something new and evaluate its success.

“The reason the legislature comes back every year is if they don’t get it right, they have an opportunity to change things in the next year,” Roberts said. “We know some people are nervous about change. We want to take a different path.”

The West Virginia Workplace Freedom Act will become law in mid-May.