

Stephen N. Reed: Let Republicans test their economic program



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We feel saddened by news of layoffs by mining companies in the northern part of the state from companies like Murray Energy.

But even if coal becomes highly prized again, the number of miners that will be needed to help extract it will be a fraction of what the industry required a generation ago. Mechanization has seen to that over the decades. Now new federal regulations and the rise of natural gas seem to be poised to deliver coal's knockout punch.

That is the hand dealt to the people of West Virginia and its political leaders today. The only saving grace regarding the decline of coal jobs across much of the Mountain State is that it has been gradual enough for some to start thinking ahead to the next chapter in West Virginia's economy.

Enter State Senate President Bill Cole (R-Mercer), the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party for governor this year. Cole's rapid rise in state politics has been a marked contrast to long, steady success in the auto industry with multiple dealerships in southern West Virginia and Kentucky.

Now, imagine you're a successful car dealer in southern West Virginia and, year after year, decade after decade, you hear the do-nothing pablum that West Virginia's state and Congressional leaders, even governors, offer to the citizens they are supposed to serve when it comes to the state's economy.

Cole and any other business-minded folks must have shaken their heads continuously for years as they saw no other path tried, no new efforts even suggested by those in charge of state government.

Even though Cole managed to have successful operations in southern West Virginia — a feat in and of itself — he had to have seen other hardworking business people who were not so fortunate. Even proud Bluefield, once the banking capital of the southern coalfields, now has many storefronts closed up due to coal's steady decline.

So Cole looks around and decides to see if West Virginia is ready to become a more business-friendly state. From the looks of the Republicans' success last election, he looks like a man with a partner in the majority of West Virginia voters. Time will tell.

In states where right to work is law, there are indeed low paying jobs.

But guess what? Because the state is more open to business, more and better-paying companies also open, creating the next rung in the ladder for workers who have proven themselves. These companies can begin to multiply because the whole business climate checkerboard has been reset.

Instead of chasing businesses away, smart states try to work with them to create jobs for their citizens.

For too many decades, West Virginia has missed out on national economic recoveries due to its anti-

business climate. Think about it: Who wants to locate their business in West Virginia when they can get a much better business environment in another state? Businesses go shopping for new sites just as individual consumers go shopping for the best deals at different grocery or department stores.

This doesn't mean that West Virginia has to give away the store to attract new businesses. However, if we want to take advantage of our beautifully situated location — right in the middle of the Eastern Seaboard — while offering gateway to the Midwest — we must enact bold, pro-business initiatives. Otherwise, we will continue to be ignored while other states around us get all the attention.

Right to work and ending the prevailing wage are not meant as punishments to West Virginia workers.

To the contrary, they are a sincere legislative effort to start building better layers with higher-paying jobs to West Virginia's economy before coal revenues dry up completely.

At least the Republicans have thought seriously about what comes next after coal. Let's face it: that's more than the other side could say for over 80 legislative sessions.

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