

# Wanted: Former residents to fill jobs

JEFF LESTER > News Editor

For 30 years or more, economic development in far Southwest Virginia has focused on finding jobs for local residents whose industries had shrunk or disappeared, according to Lenowisco Planning District Executive Director Ron Flanary.

The goal was to recruit light- and medium-skill manufacturing plants to hire laid-off miners and folks whose sewing or furniture factory shut down.

But the coalfield region is in an economic and cultural transformation, Flanary says. Economic developers now face a dilemma they thought they'd never see — available high-skill jobs and not enough local folks to fill them.



That's why a group of regional officials has launched Return to Roots, an effort to persuade two decades' worth of Southwest Virginia expatriates to come home and see what the region has to offer that it couldn't offer before.

Return to Roots is a marketing and information campaign aimed at the estimated 15,000 people who have graduated from high schools in a nine-county area over the last 20 years and moved out of the region, Flanary explained in a Tuesday interview.

The project covers the seven coalfield counties along with Washington and Smyth counties, he said.

## REGION HAS CHANGED

In recent years, Southwest Virginia has changed in ways that people who left the area may not know about, Flanary noted.

Particularly, high-tech employment is coming in a big way. For example, two major companies, CGI-AMS and Northrop Grumman, are building facilities in Lebanon that will employ more than 700 people. Many of those jobs require software engineering expertise and other programming skills.

Area colleges have grown dramatically as well and are adding degree and certificate programs to help train high-tech workers. The University of Virginia's College at Wise continues to grow in size and influence as an economic and cultural catalyst.

Economic developers believe new technology facilities already in the works, along with the region's developing fiber-optic broadband network, will serve as magnets for even more technology-based companies.

Outside the coalfields, officials have at times struggled to fill technology jobs at existing companies, such as a General Dynamics facility in Smyth County, Flanary said.

Existing Southwest Virginia companies are trying to fill a total of 2,000 job vacancies, he said.

Needed job skills include software development and information technology management, laboratory technicians, project managers, electrical and industrial engineers, nurses, physical therapists, physicians and pharmacists.

Along with employment opportunities, regional quality of life is going through a transformation. New housing opportunities are growing, and recreational and cultural outlets are on the increase.

## THE OUTREACH

A coalition of area officials put their heads together to craft a solution that helps fill the region's new jobs and attempts to reverse the long-standing trend of Southwest Virginia go-getters leaving for opportunities they once couldn't find at home, Flanary said.

The group partnered with Radford-based Virginia Economic Bridge and obtained a Virginia Tobacco Commission grant to launch Return to Roots. Gov. Tim Kaine formally announced the project in September.

The effort includes a Web site, [www.returntoroots.org](http://www.returntoroots.org). The site offers a database where job seekers can post resumes and employers can list job postings, along with general information on changes in Southwest Virginia's employment profile. It also highlights higher education opportunities, regional attractions, lists of high school reunions, continuing education programs, feature stories and more.

Also, this month, Return to Roots will begin a direct mail campaign, sending postcards to as many of the 15,000 outmigrants as can be found. They will get one card per month through April, Flanary said.

Along with informing people who might come home to work, project officials are cultivating media attention locally, so that their families will be aware of the campaign and tell them, he said.

For more information on Return to Roots, visit the Web site or call Virginia Economic Bridge at 540/831-6389. You can also write to Return to Roots, VEB, P.O. Box 7035, Radford, Va. 24142.