

VCEDA Celebrates 20th Anniversary

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Since its creation by the Virginia General Assembly in 1988, the Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority has helped Southwest Virginia grow by approving \$117 million in funding for more than 200 regional projects and helping to bring nearly 12,000 jobs to the region.

These economic development figures were part of the information shared today during the annual meeting of VCEDA's executive advisory board and a 20th anniversary celebration for the organization, "Twenty Years of Economic Transformation and Diversification," held at the Russell County Conference Center in Lebanon.

"In these 20 years, VCEDA has had a hand in helping to bring more than \$2 billion in announced investments to the region, including new opportunities in information technology, manufacturing, energy, and other basic job-creating operations," said Jonathan Belcher, VCEDA executive director.

Belcher outlined economic development highlights for each county of the seven county, one city region VCEDA serves, including the 3,000-acre Southern Gap Business Park in Buchanan County that will hold a ribbon cutting later this year for its first business occupant, an IT support center bringing 400 jobs to the region.

The executive advisory board and other guests numbering around 100 total also viewed a multimedia presentation titled "Virginia's e-Region: The Path to Success," which highlighted the advances made throughout the region during the 20 years since VCEDA was created, and also discussed VCEDA's current marketing strategy for "Virginia's e-Region," which focuses on the key competitive advantages of the region in electronic information technology, energy, education and emerging technologies."

Two former Virginia governors addressed the group and stressed the importance of education as the key to success.

"Business executives have choices about where to locate their companies," said former Virginia Governor Gerald Baliles, who was the keynote speaker. "And it's important for a region to know your vulnerabilities so you can improve your strengths and show prospects the quality of your workforce." Governor from 1986 to 1990, Baliles signed the legislation in 1988, creating VCEDA to diversify the economy and bring jobs to the coalfield region of the Commonwealth.

He also was the longest-serving chairman of the VCEDA executive advisory board, a broad-based group of business advisors from throughout the state, that was created in 1989.

Former Virginia Governor Linwood Holton (1970-1974), a charter member of the

advisory board, recognized the region's community colleges, the University of Virginia's College at Wise, the Appalachian School of Law, the University of Appalachia College of Pharmacy and other institutions such as the Dickenson Center for Education and Research for their roles in furthering education in the VCEDA region.

"I say that education is the key to success, and there is bound to be a correlation between an increase in jobs and higher wages and the credentials and products of those educational institutions," said Holton.

The group also heard about the early days of VCEDA from Ford C. Quillen, who, as a delegate from Southwest Virginia, introduced the legislation in the Virginia General Assembly to create VCEDA.

"We needed to do more for ourselves in economic development in Southwest Virginia," said Quillen. "And we needed to provide a funding source to help the counties work together to attract industry and jobs."

The legislation created VCEDA to manage funds created by severance taxes contributed by the coal and gas industries to diversify the economy and to attract jobs to the region.

"Looking back, having the money earmarked for economic development has served the purpose," said Quillen.

Mike Quillen, CEO of Alpha Natural Resources, the first chairman of VCEDA and currently serving as treasurer, said VCEDA "has been very diligent in how the funds are distributed" for projects throughout the region.

"VCEDA is unique and it gives our region a benefit that no other part of the Commonwealth has."

About Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority and Virginia's e-Region: The Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority, created by the Virginia General Assembly in 1988 to diversify the region's economy and create jobs, markets Virginia's e-Region. Virginia's e-Region focuses on electronic information technology, energy, education and emerging technologies. Located in southwestern Virginia the region includes Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, and Wise counties and the City of Norton.

http://www.virginiastar.net/index.php/news/article/vceda_celebrates_20th_anniversary/