

https://www.wvnews.com/news/wvnews/northern-panhandle-groups-seek-to-advance-job-training-capabilities/article_9af2212e-5789-59f3-b3f9-7606808e401a.html

TOP STORY

Northern Panhandle groups seek to advance job training capabilities

by Conor Griffith BUSINESS EDITOR Apr 30, 2019



WesBanco was the first private partner to donate to the cause but Pat Ford said he hopes this will be the first of several. Photo courtesy of Pat Ford

WHEELING — With a recent donation from WesBanco, organizations in the Northern Panhandle aim to create a comprehensive work force training program to ensure in-demand jobs can be filled locally.

The Business Development Corporation of the Northern Panhandle partnered with West Virginia Northern Community College in order to stay ahead of the anticipated workforce demands in the region which requires the formulation of a long-term strategy. WesBanco donated \$5,000 to the partnership to begin that formulation.

"This generous gift supports our efforts to respond to the expansion of the region's workforce by providing industry driven skill-training that supports both manufacturing and advanced manufacturing of existing and potential new industries in our region," said Mike Koon, Interim President of West Virginia Northern.

Pat Ford, the corporation's executive director, said WesBanco was the first private partner to donate but he hopes more will also show their support. He said the \$5,000 donation will be used to gain support from U.S. Economic Development Administration and WorkForce West Virginia. The goal, he said, is to gather enough funding for staff and equipment to build or renovate a new jobs training facility.

"West Virginia Northern already has a facility set up in Wheeling," Ford said, adding that much of the economic growth is taking place further north in places like Weirton. "What we want to do and the purpose of this initiative is to actually build a facility that's proximate to the jobs if not centrally located so it's easily accessible to the residents who could benefit from such a training program. That's why we decided to put something in the Weirton area."

Ford said this is just one part of the overall plan. The longterm goal is to set up a career pathway by incorporating not just West Virginia Northern but also the career training programs at other institutions such as Brooke High School and the the John D. Rockefeller IV Career Center in Hancock. That way, he said, students that express interests in jobs such as welding can begin early and have a direct transition to college level education.

He said the job in mind right now is welding, which is what the new training center will emphasize.

The American Welding Society predicts the United States will need more than 400,000 welders by 2025, and Ford said about 3,500 of those welders will be needed in the Northern Panhandle alone in the coming years.

Furthermore, he said the corporation manually takes count of the jobs in the region whenever a local business expands or relocates, such as [Bidell Gas Compression](#) or [Pietro Fiorentini](#). The corporation has adopted this approach since the U.S. Census Bureau or Bureau of Labor Statistics can often be years behind in its data. By this method, Ford said 3,200 jobs have been added in the Northern Panhandle.

Despite these successes, Ford said one hurdle still facing the region is that of education and ensuring that a pipeline of trained workers is ready to meet the needs of industry looking to set up shop. This was highlighted during an EDA-sponsored Regional Economic Development Summit held in Weirton.

Corporation Board Chairman C. William D'Alesio said he hopes the partnership with West Virginia Northern will address this challenge.

"The strategy, currently being developed by the BDC and West Virginia Northern, will accelerate the number of people entering the regional workforce which will create employment opportunities for our residents and continue our efforts to grow our community," he said.

Business Editor Conor Griffith can be reached by at 304-395-3168 or by email at cgriffith@statejournal.com

Conor Griffith