

LEADER TIMES

Commentary: OK Armstrong County, here's your chance
By Gerald R. Shuster, Ph.D.
April 6, 2021

For far too long politicians in Armstrong County seeking a platform have been saying what's needed in Armstrong County is a meaningful, effective plan to bring new jobs to the county.

No specific plan ever develops—just the recognition of need.

The current candidates for former Pennsylvania Rep. Jeff Pyle's legislative seat are no exception.

All are candidates espousing the same issue but without providing any tangible, specific or real solution to rectify the problem.

Finally, out of all the darkness of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, comes some light that could foreshadow the beginning of some very positive, tangible, and meaningful economic direction for Armstrong.

The key term here is "tangible" and the most critical element associated with this is a change in both direction and philosophy among all associated with economic development.

The critical first step, however, is that egos and partisan politics have to be left at the door and open minds have to replace both.

What is on the horizon for Armstrong County may not be the panacea for the whole problem but it will be a giant step from where we are now.

It will likely be and should be, the kind of approach that, of necessity, changes and adjusts with technology, education, and society — something Armstrong County politicians seem so reluctant to do.

Also for many residents, success here is measured by getting the county back to the Eljer, PPG, and Big River era.

That's the proverbial stumbling block for many.

For others it's the expectation that somewhere out there, a new ITT, Amazon, or Moderna, IBM is just on the horizon waiting for the county to build new infrastructure and they'll come knocking.

Though this is possible—with some modifications—there are other possibilities and then the latter conceivably could happen.

More realistically, the genesis for what is needed, is already evident albeit very small, but real nonetheless.

Take a walk or drive down Fifth Avenue in Ford City.

Go slowly past the former site of Ford City High School and take a look at the new sign on the site.

It announces the new physical and central regional location of one of this area's, hell, this state's most valuable assets — Butler County Community College, more familiarly known as "BC3."

If ever there was an opportunity for this county to take advantage of an opportunity that can offer endless possibilities and directions for change, unlike so many educational institutions that still operate with heads-in-sand approach, BC3 can be the very diamond in the rough and the ignitor needed to spark precisely what this county has needed for generations.

Add to that, as already noted, BC3 has the leadership which doesn't just personify thinking outside the box, but routinely does it.

No less critical, BC3 knows its audience and routinely evidences that in the smaller communities it serves.

On a limited basis, it's done so here already.

It does this as well as, if not better than, the much heralded educational giants in our beloved city 41 miles south.

To add credibility to this conclusion, the PA NEWS, a monthly publication of the PA State Association of Boroughs, the nation's fourth largest municipal organization of which this column's author is past president, included in its April issue, a major article entitled "Community Colleges—an Economic Driver of Boroughs, State."

The article highlights a number of area community colleges but foremost is BC3 and its president Dr. Nicholas C. Neupauer.

He's been BC3's president since 2007 and his service in that capacity exceeds all the state's systems of higher ed colleges and universities including the big four state related ones.

He got there and stayed there not only because he initiated true diversity on the economic panels — and not just diversity in gender and ethnicity.

He took that task a major step further.

He added a strategic and effective change in board make-up.

He saw to it that just as important in seeing to it that persons who had backgrounds in community service as well strategic planning and education got a seat at the table where community initiatives were developed and integrated.

The result was new, fresh ideas generated from others beyond politics.

Next realistic and specific needs were evaluated and tested.

More important, communities saw the genesis of ideas that ultimately might allow them to prosper and take root.

Clearly not all worked but from the strategic planning and ideas that resulted, some did pan out and the communities were the winners.

Now add to the new faces and leadership seated at the table, the new ideas, and new methods to integrate them beyond the hackneyed, tired politically limited methods of the past, as well as the proposed pandemic funding for new infrastructure likely to be available, and small counties like Armstrong now have a much bigger stake in the game.

Additionally bring on board the talent and activity level BC3 brings, along with its ability to help us change and grow since they'll now "...be a part of the neighborhood," and we all benefit.

So where do we go from here?

This special election for state legislature for Armstrong County could not have at a better time.

Now citizens can make certain that none of the candidates simply regurgitate the stale "county needs jobs for economic growth."

They need to tell us in very specific terms what they propose to achieve same.

Armstrong County citizens know what's needed.

What isn't needed is stale, tired ideas that haven't worked.

The candidates can start with reading the PA NEWS article as they generate their plan.

The county needs bold, fresh, real ideas from the candidates and precise plans as to what each will do ensure that will stimulate success. Along with that, the bold start must include taking advantage of BC3 as a central focus to help us help ourselves.

Gerald R. Shuster, Ph.D., is a former Kittanning Borough councilman. He is also a professor of Political Communication Analysis/ Presidential Rhetoric at the University of Pittsburgh Dept. of Communication.