

Flood relief: Businesses need customers back

Greenbrier County shops are back in business, but customers aren't

More than three months after June's floods washed through Greenbrier County, many businesses are still trying to get back on their feet.

Kara Dense, head of the Greenbrier County Convention and Visitors Bureau, is urging consumers to head south and help revitalize the county's economy, which has suffered greatly in the aftermath.

"Businesses that were affected, especially in White Sulphur Springs and Rainelle, are really now getting back in business," she said last week on MetroNews "Talkline." "There were so many businesses that were affected just simply because of the perception. There were people who thought the entire county was under water."

As a result, many businesses that weren't affected by the flood also lost customers as well as money.

But now that the floodwaters have receded and repairs have been made, businesses in and around Greenbrier County need customers to revitalize the economy. Dense and other county officials hope some upcoming events, like Taste of Our Towns Festival, will bring people to the area to visit local shops, restaurants and other businesses.

The food event will showcase some of the county's well-known local restaurants, Dense said. The annual fundraiser, held at Carnegie Hall in Lewisburg, is like a "true kickoff to fall."

Greenbrier Valley Theatre productions, live music, showcases at Carnegie Hall, ghost tours, film screenings and more round out the county's events calendar — and that's just the month of October.

All of these events come as the Greenbrier CVB is launching a new tourism campaign with the tagline "Simply Get Away." Dense said the Greenbrier Valley is a nice place to do just that.

"It is such a great place to come and simply get away, especially in an election year where everyone seems stressed," she said. "Just come here and put it all out of your mind and come and enjoy a great weekend."

In the days and weeks following the flood, generous West Virginians opened their wallets and donated money, cleaning supplies, clothes, food and other needed items. But just because the water is gone and the debris has been removed doesn't mean help still isn't needed.

The Greenbrier Valley needs residents and tourists alike to take advantage of these events and pump their money into the county's economy. Customers who take advantage of Greenbrier County businesses this holiday season are helping to rebuild a damaged economy and put West Virginians back to work and helping local businesses stay afloat.

School systems and schools need flexibility

Just a few miles apart, elementary schools experience different issues

Call it a tale of two urban schools: one, Mary C. Snow West Side Elementary, seems to be having trouble with the year-round calendar; the other, Piedmont Elementary on the East End, does not have an issue with year round-schooling.

Mary C. Snow and Piedmont elementaries are the only two year-round public schools in West Virginia, reported the Gazette-Mail's Ryan Quinn. Cheryl Plear, the new principal of Mary C. Snow Elementary, told the Kanawha County Board of Education Monday she'd like for the high-poverty area school to get off the year-round calendar, Quinn reported.

Piedmont principal Beth Sturgill said the balanced calendar works for Piedmont.

Plear said about 320 students showed up to the West Side school on its actual first day, July 12, but about 100 more showed up about three weeks later, on Aug. 8, the date classes started for the vast majority of other Kanawha County public school students.

Last school year, Mary C. Snow had the lowest English language arts standardized test proficiency rate of all Kanawha public schools.

"I worry about students who miss three weeks of school," Plear said in a presentation she was asked to give to the Kanawha school board. "I worry about that. There's no way that you can make it up. Most of these students come here and they're already behind anyway."

And there, within a distance of only about three miles, shows why one size does not fit all when it comes to local and state education systems. Many of the issues plaguing students and families on the West Side flats are different, even from the issues faced by parents and students on the East End.

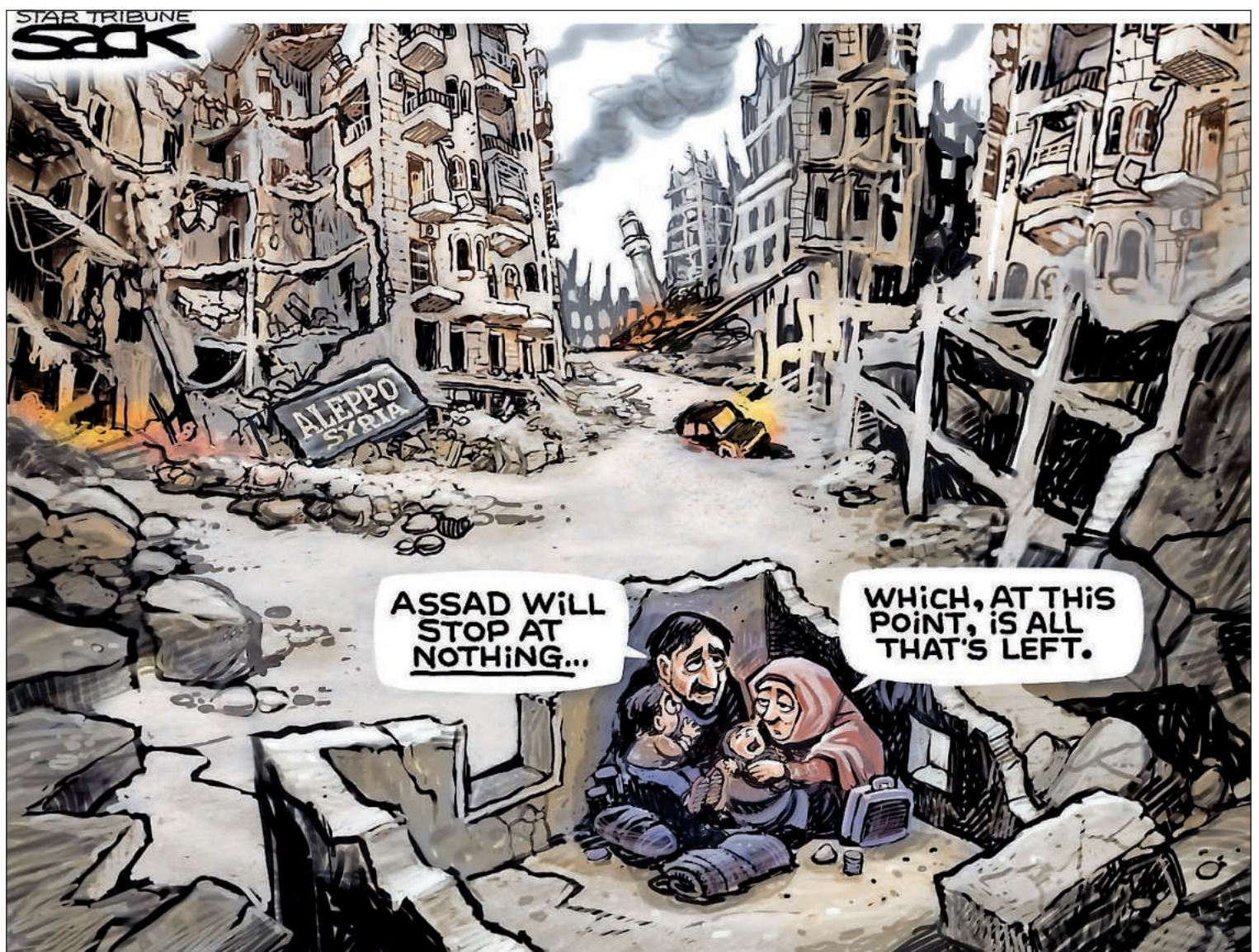
This is a great reason for flexibility.

West Virginia has one of the most highly regulated and structured public school systems in the United States — where lawmakers and education bureaucrats would make decisions that must apply to schools across the state.

The state has gotten better with local choice — giving school districts the opportunity to operate year-round schools is one. Yet the state and county still have a lot of opportunities to improve when it becomes so evident — as these two schools show — that what works in one school is not necessarily the answer for another.

Ginny West says ...

Charley enjoys summers off ... and winter, and fall, and spring.



State leads in 'corequisite' strategy

Innovative model helps students earn their degrees without remedial courses



Bruce Vandal
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Last week, faculty and staff from West Virginia's public colleges and universities set forth on a bold path to dramatically improve college completion rates in the state.

The work occurred as part of the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission's Corequisite Academy, a two-day conference held in partnership with Complete College America to help campuses implement a new model for college students deemed to be "underprepared."

Developmental, or remedial, education has long been recognized as a major barrier to student success. For too many students, placement in these classes represents a dead end in their educational journey.

Students are placed in developmental classes due to low scores on college entrance exams or low high school grade point averages. The traditional theory assumes these students are not yet ready to complete college-level coursework, so they are placed in courses intended to help them catch up — but do not count toward college credit.

Over the years, we have learned there are serious flaws in this approach. For starters, measures used to place students in developmental education courses are far from perfect.

Research from Complete College America and other leading college completion experts indicates many students who are placed in developmental classes could have succeeded in regular, credit-bearing courses.

And although exams and GPAs serve as valuable warning systems indicating a gap in students' knowledge, they do little to pinpoint the specific area in which a student may need improvement.

As a result, students spend a great deal of time and money learning content they have already mastered. This is frustrating and demoralizing for students. And, even worse, it greatly reduces their chances of ultimately completing their degree programs.

Studies have shown time is the enemy of degree completion. The longer students take to complete their degrees, the more costs they incur and the more likely that life events will derail their studies.

At community colleges across the country, just one in 10 remedial students earns his or her degree within three years. At four-year colleges, a little over a third of remedial students earn their degrees within six years.

But there is a better way. The corequisite developmental education model provides students with the support they need to

overcome any deficiencies in their knowledge and skills while simultaneously allowing them to complete college-level coursework that counts toward their degrees.

It's important to note that placing "underprepared" students directly into college-level courses is not a "dumbing down" of higher education. Students still tackle the same, rigorous coursework they were always expected to complete.

They are earning college credit, receiving the support they need and doing so at a considerably lower cost than under the old model.

Instead of holding students back to "relearn" an entire semester of content and skills, students move forward through their college program and are provided extra support as it is needed.

This method not only spares the student time and frustration, but also saves the institutions staff time and money — two important factors in keeping the cost of higher education low.

The West Virginia Community and Technical College System was among the first organizations in the country to implement the corequisite model at a system-wide scale.

In 2014, all of West Virginia's public two-year colleges committed to using the corequisite system for those students requiring developmental education.

As a result, student success rates skyrocketed. Under the previous traditional model, just 37 percent of developmental education students were completing college-level English

within two years of entering a community and technical college. After the corequisite model was introduced, that number jumped to 74 percent after just one semester.

The results were even more astonishing in math. Under the traditional model, only 14 percent of students completed college-level math within two years. But after one semester using the corequisite approach, 63 percent completed the course.

Since then, colleges and universities across the nation — including many four-year colleges here in the Mountain State — have tested the corequisite method with similar results.

That is why I am tremendously excited West Virginia's public two-year and four-year colleges have committed to transitioning 80 percent of all developmental education students into corequisite courses by 2018.

The commission and the Community and Technical College System should be commended for offering statewide and national leadership in addressing developmental education. They identified a problem. They found a solution.

And now they are using their unique positions as state higher education coordinating agencies to expand this innovative strategy to make real, positive changes for students across West Virginia.

Bruce Vandal is senior vice president for results at Complete College America, a national nonprofit working to increase the number of Americans with career certificates or college degrees.

Real, needed budget solutions for W.Va.

A balanced budget, growing revenues will drive economy

Keith Pauley
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



West Virginia has many issues that need to be solved, and they all need money: More money for highways, education and internet access, just to name a few.

However, West Virginia can't seem to pay the bills it already has. State revenues have been deeply affected by the rapid declines in the coal industry and by low prices for natural gas, as well as their related suppliers and service providers. Not only are severance taxes down, but business income and personal income taxes are off as well.

Here is a roadmap of simple legislative actions to solve our growing state budget crisis.

First, we need to help the private sector add jobs, which will create both business and personal income tax revenues.

Let's do the math. Businesses operate from their profit and

loss statement. They begin with their revenue, which is largely fixed by the market, then they subtract their expenses, such as utilities, transportation, regulatory compliance, labor and taxes. If they have a positive bottom line, they add jobs. If they have a negative one, they lay off employees or go out of business.

Therefore, the Public Service Commission needs to reduce utility and transportation costs by proactively reviewing the rates of the companies they regulate.

We must reduce unnecessary regulations, like Certificates of Need for hospitals or licenses for innocuous trades like massage therapists. We need to restructure the tax system to allow businesses to thrive by increasing consumptive taxes

and reducing income tax rates.

We also need public education that produces graduates with the skills to successfully compete nationally and internationally.

Second, we need to attract a younger generation of employees to West Virginia with new skills and an appetite to purchase their first home and first new car.

This issue requires many simultaneous solutions. Of course, we need more and higher wage jobs to replace the coal industry and its supply chain. However, a growing jobs market requires higher educational attainment, improved infrastructure and lower drug addiction rates. These all require significant investments by the state.

Last, we need to balance our state budget despite rapidly declining revenues.

We cannot tax ourselves into prosperity, because taxes have a negative effect on private sector job growth. Here are some common sense ways to reduce our government spending to match our state's revenue:

- Eliminate low priority programs such as those found in the Cardinal Institute's "Wild Wasteful West Virginia" report.

- Create a legislative budget with enough detail to allow the governor and Legislature to manage the accounts in every agency.

- Eliminate as many special purpose accounts as possible by placing funds in the general fund to be managed by the governor and Legislature.

- Conduct CPA-style independent audits of every government agency on both financial accounting practices and program efficiencies.

- Create a stronger set of ethics laws that further protect whistleblowers and give greater authority to prosecute government officials for misdeeds.

With a balanced budget and growing revenues, West Virginia can make the investments it needs to make to drive a healthy economy and increase the quality of life of our people.

Keith Pauley is a Republican candidate for the House of Delegates 35th District.