

Appalachian commission official visits region

KEITH STRANGE / Staff Writer



Appalachian Regional Commission Alternate Federal Co-Chair Richard Peltz, second from left, visited the St. Paul site of Dominion Virginia Power's planned Virginia City Hybrid Energy Center while in town this week. Pictured with Peltz are, from left, Wise County Administrator Skip Skinner, Peltz, Dominion Virginia Power Government Affairs Representative James Beazley, Lenowisco Planning District Commission Executive Director Ron Flanary and St. Paul Vice-Mayor Steve Stewart. (Keith Strange photo)

NORTON — Appalachian Regional Commission support for a project is more than just a check, says commission federal Co-Chairman Richard Peltz — it's leverage for money and other assistance from a variety of local, state and federal agencies.

In an interview during his tour of the region this week, Peltz said that by working with local and state officials, funds can be made available to help small businesses through investment in infrastructure.

Peltz said that an investment in basic infrastructure is an investment in the entire region's future.

"You have to have the basics like utility service and telecommunications for small businesses to be successful," he said.

One example of infrastructure creating economic stability in the region is a regional broadband Internet project that serves the coalfield counties of Southwest Virginia, Peltz said.

The \$10 million, 206-mile broadband project was funded by \$4.6 million from the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration and \$5.2 million from the Virginia Tobacco Commission. This investment brought 1,220 jobs to the region, representing \$54 million in investments and \$37 million in annual payroll.

Ron Flanary, executive director of the Lenowisco Planning District Commission, pointed to an additional investment that illustrates how ARC funding can provide the spark for additional investments in county projects.

"They (EDA and the tobacco commission) only invested \$40,000 out of a total funding pool of \$14 million for last-mile broadband infrastructure in Jonesville in Lee County," he said. "ARC stepped up, and that allowed us to use that investment to leverage much more."

Flanary said an endorsement by the federal government creates legitimacy for a project.

"The tobacco commission, Rural Utility Service and the Economic Development Administration came on board after ARC's investment.

"It's not just about the money, it's about the endorsement."

One critical part in getting funding from the commission is having a viable, clear plan for projects that create future sustainability.

“To increase the chances of getting funding, groups need to make sure they’re working with local planning districts who in turn forward them to the state,” Peltz said. “The state then prioritizes the projects and forwards them to us. It’s a bottoms-up approach.”

Flanary said much progress has been made, but more work needs to be done on the local level to jump-start a boom in small business development in Southwest Virginia.

“What we don’t do well in this region in terms of assistance to small business is have the resources to sit down with them and help them with a viable business plan and funding assistance,” he said.

Peltz heads regional commission

Richard Peltz was named alternate federal co-chairman of the Appalachian Regional Commission by President George W. Bush on Nov. 18, 2002.

Prior to the appointment, Peltz was deputy secretary for local and area transportation at the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

He had previously served as Fifth District administrator for Pennsylvania Congressman Bill Clinger. In addition, he is a former State Department intelligence analyst, as well as a former U.S. Forest Service firefighter.

He received a B.A. magna cum laude in political science from Pennsylvania’s Indiana University and is a graduate of Harvard University’s Program for Senior Executives in State and Local Government.