

Why the Kids Won't Stay in West Virginia

Implementing policy meant to increase the image of the state in the hope of attracting a younger and more vibrant work force will do little to increase actual immigration into the state or to retain those already here.

Story By John Dove

Last month, the not-for-profit group Vision Shared Inc. released its "Work Plan for West Virginia," developed by Market Street Services.

The report was submitted as a follow-up to research developed in 2000 by the same groups and meant to highlight not only some of the positive economic changes that have occurred in the state but also to detail areas of deficiency and potential policy changes that still need to be implemented. Admittedly, some of the recommendations are in the right direction, especially judicial reform. However, much of what the report calls for does appear rather lacking.

One of the more interesting suggested measures is building West Virginia's image to attract and retain an educated and younger work force. The recommendation specifically calls for a commission to investigate the challenges that West Virginia faces as to why it can't retain a younger work force and to implement policy that would stem out-migration and create incentives meant to retain West Virginian youth.

The report details how this goal potentially could be reached based on the policies of three other states: Iowa, Oregon and Michigan. Each state has its own special name for its efforts: the Generation Iowa Commission, Brand Oregon and Cool Cities, respectively. The report believes the latter two are especially illustrative of how West Virginia could effectively market itself to a younger generation.

Michigan's Cool Cities initiative is particularly enlightening, especially if it were to be implemented in West Virginia, which the report implicitly believes is a viable way to market the state and increase its image and perception.

Michigan began its initiative in 2004, basing the program on a quality-of-place indicator. When a city meets certain basic criteria, it is then deemed a "Cool City" and is eligible to receive state funding to better develop its community. However, the entire concept is derived from some sort of misconceived notion that young individuals prefer a "sense of place" within a community and that somehow this alone will bring in young talent.

It's rather ironic that the report actually recommends adopting policies meant to attract and retain a younger generation from the state of Michigan, a state which has a current unemployment rate of 8.5 percent, has seen real GDP decline by 1.2 percent during the past year, out-migration of individuals between the ages 22-34 with college degrees of more than 6 percent and active recruitment by and migration to the state of Wyoming. It's true--Michiganders are moving to the state of Wyoming, which is known for, um . . . (well, at least there are viable employment opportunities there).

Now if "cool cities" were the answer, then what happened in Michigan? What motto could West Virginia forge based on the Michigan policy experiment?

"Hey, move to West Virginia! We might not have a friendly business environment, or jobs, or a favorable tax system, but we've got cool parks for you to romp in and kick around the old hacky sack. Come find your 'sense of place' here in West Virginia."

Now don't get me wrong, I enjoy long walks in the park just as much as the next person, but I enjoy them more when I know I have a positive income flow into my pocket. However, this can only come from more fundamental change at the state level: a more conducive business environment, which will then allow private firms to competitively bid away and retain young talent from both in and out of state locals.

Although the report does give some positive recommendations into other areas, much of it is neither far reaching enough nor generally viable. Forming government agencies to address potential problem areas simply churns the public machine without any real advancement to show for it. It's a bit like assembling a committee of wolves to assess the security of the hen house.

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work force will do little to increase actual immigration into the state or to retain those already here. Without real structural and institutional change, i.e. decreases in taxation, state spending and a more favorable business environment conducive to developing and increasing employment opportunities and young talent, no amount of "really cool" signs or "cool city" designations will effectively retain and bring in young individuals.

Well, maybe this one: "West Virginia: At least we're cooler than Michigan."

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