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Karen Burns

Coal, Kentuckinomics, and a Cleaner Future

Last week, the University of Kentucky gained national media attention as its Board of Trustees voted to approve the new \$7 million men's basketball dormitory complex. The new complex will be funded by a group handpicked by UK alumnus and longtime athletic booster, coal executive Joe Craft. Controversy arose, however, in the selection of the dorm name. The famous Joe B. Hall Wildcat Lodge is slated for demolition, we learned, to make way for the Wildcat Coal Lodge.

The inclusion of the word "coal" in the dorm's title stirred up pundits and environmentalists alike. MSNBC's Rachel Maddow devoted a segment to the issue, invoking an almost Dickensian imagery of 19th century coal miners. The irony, many have noted, is that the Lodge with "coal" in its name will be the most ecologically-friendly building on UK's campus. The coal dust of the past, these critics say, has no place on green energy buildings of the future.

For those of us who grew up in Coal Country, however, the dichotomy simply isn't that clean-cut. For many of us, coal is neither an ironic joke nor a quaint antiquity. It isn't just something that Bob Cratchit throws on the fire, nor is it the source of Derek Zoolander's hypochondriac "black lung." It is the basis of our very own Kentuckinomics. We can't dismiss coal as an embarrassing relic of a bygone age; our lives, as well as those of our friends, family,

and coworkers, are inextricably linked to the production of coal. We want to see cleaner energy forms. We want to protect our air and our groundwater. At the same time, we must acknowledge that many Kentucky counties rely on coal as their sole industry.

As a native of a coal-reliant Eastern Kentucky county, I was faced with the reality of coal economics from a very early age. When I was in third grade, the local mine workers union chapter went on strike. Suddenly, my classmates seemed anxious, tired, hungry, and sad. Even as an eight-year-old, I realized that coal provided the economic backbone of my entire hometown. In college, I noticed that about a third of my classmates had their educations funded by coal in some way. Their fathers were miners, or mine executives. Even if they didn't return home to work in the mines, they were forever linked to the extraction and processing of bituminous coal.

More personally, I've watched the complex ways in which my own relatives, lives have been impacted by the physical realities of coal mining. I've seen coal company salaries pay for my cousins' homes, cars and tuitions, and I've seen their families struggle with the setbacks of mining injuries and mine closures. I've watched coal provide my friends' and families' livelihood. At the same time, I've feared the repercussions, both economic and environmental, of my hometown's continued reliance on coal as

its sole industry. Like many other Kentuckians, I am left wondering how to balance my personal, economic and social viewpoints about coal.

As many mines in the eastern Kentucky area deplete their resources, and as we increasingly turn to cleaner and greener forms of energy, what happens to the people who rely on coal? How do we balance the environmental goals of safer water and cleaner air with the social goals of keeping our fellow Kentuckians fed, clothed and employed? If we, indeed, phase out the coal industry, how do we replace it in a socially and economically sensitive manner, while ensuring that Eastern Kentucky's coal towns do not experience debilitating poverty and joblessness?

by Heather C. Watson

Perhaps coal-dependent Kentucky towns will counteract the depletion of mines and the advent of green technology by developing new industries. However, infrastructure shifts don't just pop up on their own. The creation of non-coal jobs will require a concentrated effort by state and federal legislators to provide more accessible roads, improved schools, and other amenities that render an area desirable to industry. Perhaps new discoveries in cleaner coal technology will find less environmentally damaging uses for coal as we open our coal fields up to new industry.

There are no easy answers. While it's convenient to fall into pro- or anti- coal schools of thought, we should all strive to fall into a pro-Kentuckian



Design by Cliff Dickens

We want to protect our air and our groundwater. At the same time, we must acknowledge that many Kentucky counties rely on coal as their sole industry.

camp. We, as Kentuckians, should look to strike a balance between a safer, cleaner future and the prosperity of our hardworking friends and neighbors.

We need to work with our elected officials to systematically address the economic realities of Coal Field towns in a way that provides industrial alternatives for the area.

We need to educate ourselves on coal, its alternatives, and the environmental and economic repercussions of each, making use of multi-viewpoint resources such as the UK

College of Engineering's upcoming Forum on Coal on Kentucky. ■

University of Kentucky will host a Forum on Coal Thursday, November 5.

Visit coalinkkentucky.com for details.

Heather C. Watson is a native of Hueysville, in Floyd County. She is an alumna of Transylvania University and the University of Kentucky. She lives in Lexington with her fiancé, Bob, and their black lab, Max.

The University of Kentucky Presents: A Forum on Coal

Check website for schedule changes/updates/additions at coalinkkentucky.com

Day Sessions Held at Hilary J. Boone Center

Welcome and Introductory Presentations
10am-10:45am

Overview of Coal in Kentucky's History

Ron Bryant, Kentucky Historian

Overview of Coal in Kentucky Today

Al Cross, Director, Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, University of Kentucky

Session 1 - Economics and Coal in Kentucky

11am-12pm
Jason Bailey, Research and Policy Director, MACED
Economist TBD
Former Governor Paul Patton
Hon. Wayne T. Rutherford, Judge-Executive, Pike County, Kentucky

Session 2 - People and Coal in Kentucky

1pm-2pm
Hon. Rocky Adkins, State Representative

From the Coal Fields

Two individuals will share their experiences of living in the coal fields

Session 3 - Aspects of Coal in Kentucky

2:15pm-4pm
Joe Blackburn, Office of Surface Mining

Reforestation

Dr. Chris Barton, Assoc. Prof. of Forestry

Policy

Hon. Robin Webb, State Senator

Safety

Terry Bentley, Chief of the Accident Investigation and Prevention Division, Coal Mine Safety and Health Administration

Research

Dr. Rodney Andrews, Director, Center for Applied Energy Research

Session 4 - Environment and Coal in Kentucky

4:15pm-5pm
Dr. Rick Clewett, Professor Emeritus, Eastern Kentucky University
Steve Gardner, President/CEO, Engineering Consulting Services

Session 5 - Impact of Coal, Today and Tomorrow

Welcome & Opening Remarks

Dr. Len Peters, Secretary, Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet
Presentation from Young Leader: Brad Luttrell, Recent University of Kentucky Alumnus

Keynote Speakers

Tom FitzGerald, Dir., Kentucky Resources Council
Joseph W. Craft III, Pres. and CEO, Alliance Coal
Jeff Goodell, *New York Times* Bestselling Author and Speaker
Fred Palmer, Senior Vice President of Government Relations, Peabody Energy
Moderated Q&A hosted by Bill Goodman



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