**ReImagine Appalachia**

**Meeting with Washington County Commissioners**

**September 16, 2021**

Present: Commissioners Kevin Ritter, Charlie Schilling; MTimes reporter Michele Newbanks, Clerk Ben Cowdery, George Banziger

I introduced myself by stressing my experience in strategic planning, especially with Washington County Harvest of Hope and Washington County Health Department. I also mentioned the research I did 40 years ago on the relationship between economic indicators and mental health. Discussions in the Health Department have led us in the strategic planning group to conclude that economic factors and health inequities are inextricably connected.

I used the latter experience to transition to the endemic nature of poverty, economic hardship, and health inequities in Washington County and how these indicators of high unemployment and economic difficulty have persisted over time and resisted any attempts at change. I also noted that population decline in the county (census figures show that Washington County has dropped below 60,000 in total population) and the need to attract young people to the area.

Then I mentioned the unique opportunity afforded this region by the federal economic stimulus money available during this period through the infrastructure bill and reconciliation bill (assuming that they pass in some form), particularly programs to address climate change. This provides us with a unique opportunity to “reimagine Appalachia” and finally address the endemic aspects of economic hardship in this region. ReImagine Appalachia is a movement centered in the Ohio River Valley and includes four states: Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. I described how in the past serious federal investments have been made in the Tennessee Valley region (i.e., TVA) and Colorado River basin with successful outcomes; federal funds need now to be directed at the Ohio River Valley. I summarized the major features of the resolution and mentioned the groups which have endorsed it. An advantage to their endorsing the document is that federal officials notice this kind of endorsement when making decisions about where to allocate federal funds.

I mentioned that none of the features of the resolution is engraved in stone and that endorsing the document does not commit them to any particular action or project.

Both commissioners mentioned that they are supportive of the comments I made in my description and rationale for the resolution, but they have problems with the wording in several parts of the resolution itself. Mr. Ritter gave me a copy of the resolution with his comments—I have scanned and included that document as part of my report. He said that if changes were made, we might be able to find common ground, and he and Mr. Schilling might be supportive. I was asked to follow up with the two commissioners with a modified document.

George Banziger