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Greater Wheeling Regional Plan

ACTION PLAN FOR ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT



Action Plan for Economic Development

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Executive Summary

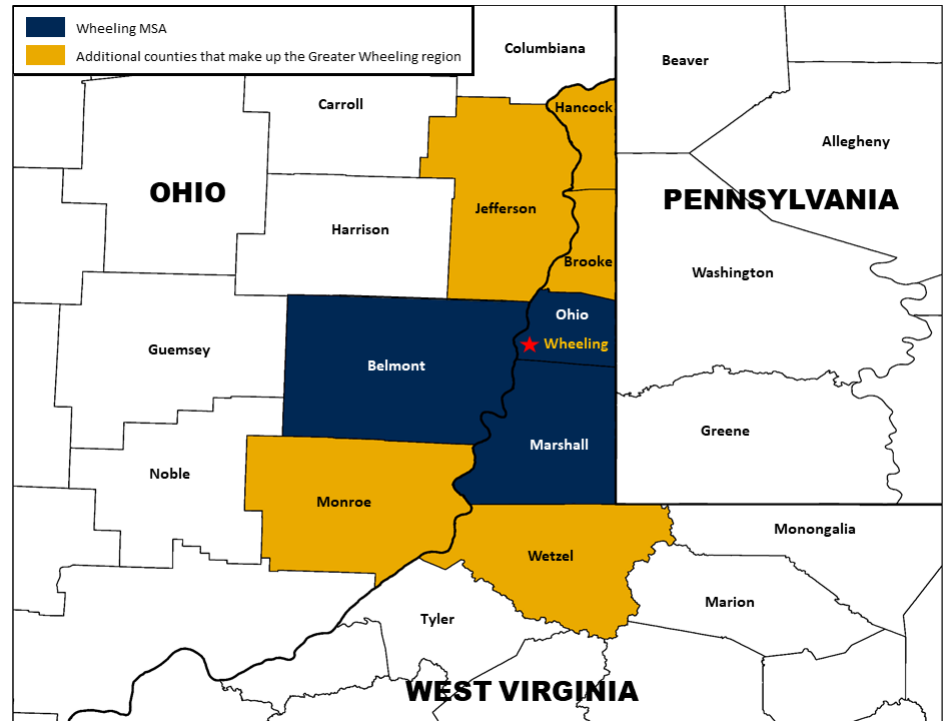
The Wheeling Region has a long and rich history. It is where West Virginia declared its “independence” from Virginia. It is the middle of the Northern Panhandle, the industrial heartland of West Virginia for much of the 20th century. It has been, and continues to be, an industrial and commercial center. However, the passage of time and the change that it has brought has not always been beneficial to the region. As a result, leaders in the region have begun a process to reevaluate and reinvent the Wheeling area and improve the regional economy.

The Wheeling Area Chamber of Commerce engaged the WVU Bureau of Business and Economic Research to create a strategic plan to guide development. After conducting a regional economic study, seeking public input through a survey,¹ and discussing the situation with key stakeholders, four interrelated development strategies emerged. In this report, we discuss these strategies and recommend actions to further the Wheeling region’s economic development.

WORKFORCE TRAINING: Our research revealed a consensus that the long-term economic viability of the Wheeling region is dependent upon the quality of its workforce. Related to this, there is general agreement among survey respondents and stakeholders that the current state of the workforce does not reflect the educational needs of current or anticipated future employers. We make the following recommendations for improving the match between education and employer needs:

- Determine specific worker requirements of local businesses.
- Improve communication between firms and local education institutions.

Figure 1: Greater Wheeling Region



- Increase resources to transform these ideas into tangible training opportunities.

REDEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES: To spur economic development, it often makes sense to build upon what already exists in the region. In the economic development realm, this can have two meanings. One is to emphasize business retention and expansion rather than recruitment. Another is to use and improve on existing places and features in a community. Both have implications for efforts in Wheeling. We make the following recommendations for redevelopment in the region:

- Concentrate development energies on the existing assets of the region
- Promote targeted development and redevelopment

INDUSTRIAL CLUSTERS: Wheeling has a pair of traditional industries that could play a substantial role as the area moves forward. Natural gas exploration, extraction, and support; and health care have been basic industries in the region in recent years. Changing

¹ Please see the other reports in this series for more details.

circumstances have affected each industry negatively, making it difficult to recommend either as an immediate focus for development activities. However, these sectors remain important parts of the regional economy and offer potential for long-term growth. Our recommendations for taking full advantage of these clusters are as follows:

- Work with key policymakers to ensure the future viability of the energy industry in the region.
- Retain a focus on downstream natural gas industries, such as polymers and chemicals, over the long run.
- Monitor utilization of health care facilities and services to determine market demand.
- Support medical workforce training efforts to serve existing and potential facilities.
- Encourage health care providers to expand into underutilized fields within the market to offer greater diversity of services

REGIONAL IDENTITY: Nothing discussed above will truly matter, however, if there continues to be a lack of consensus on what makes up the “Wheeling region.” It is

essential to define the region before undertaking any other activity. However, there is no consensus on what is included in such a region. To ensure development efforts are clearly defined in the region, we recommend the following:

- Determine what is meant by “the Wheeling Region” through stakeholder discussion supported by data analysis.
- Focus marketing (both to the public and to potential “investors”) on this “defined region.”
- Create database information systems that identify the situation and potential for the region.
- Only consider (undertake) activities, investments, and endeavors that work in and for that region.

Overall, these four activities will help determine the future development direction for the Wheeling Region. Once the region is defined, work related to the other three themes can commence in earnest and move the area in the desired direction for the future.

1 Introduction

The Wheeling Region has a long and rich history. It is where West Virginia declared its “independence” from Virginia. It is the middle of the Northern Panhandle, the industrial heartland of West Virginia for much of the 20th century. It has been, and continues to be, an industrial and commercial center.

However, the passage of time and the change that it has brought has not always been beneficial to the region. Regional population has been in decline for two decades, employment has trended downward, and income growth has been flat for the last two years. As a result, leaders in the region have begun a process to reevaluate and reinvent the Wheeling area and improve the regional economy.

The Wheeling Area Chamber of Commerce engaged the WVU Bureau of Business and Economic Research to create a strategic plan to guide development. After conducting a regional economic study, seeking public input through a survey,² and discussing the situation with key stakeholders, four interrelated development strategies emerged:

- Workforce Training
- Redevelopment Activities
- Industrial Clusters
- Regional Identity

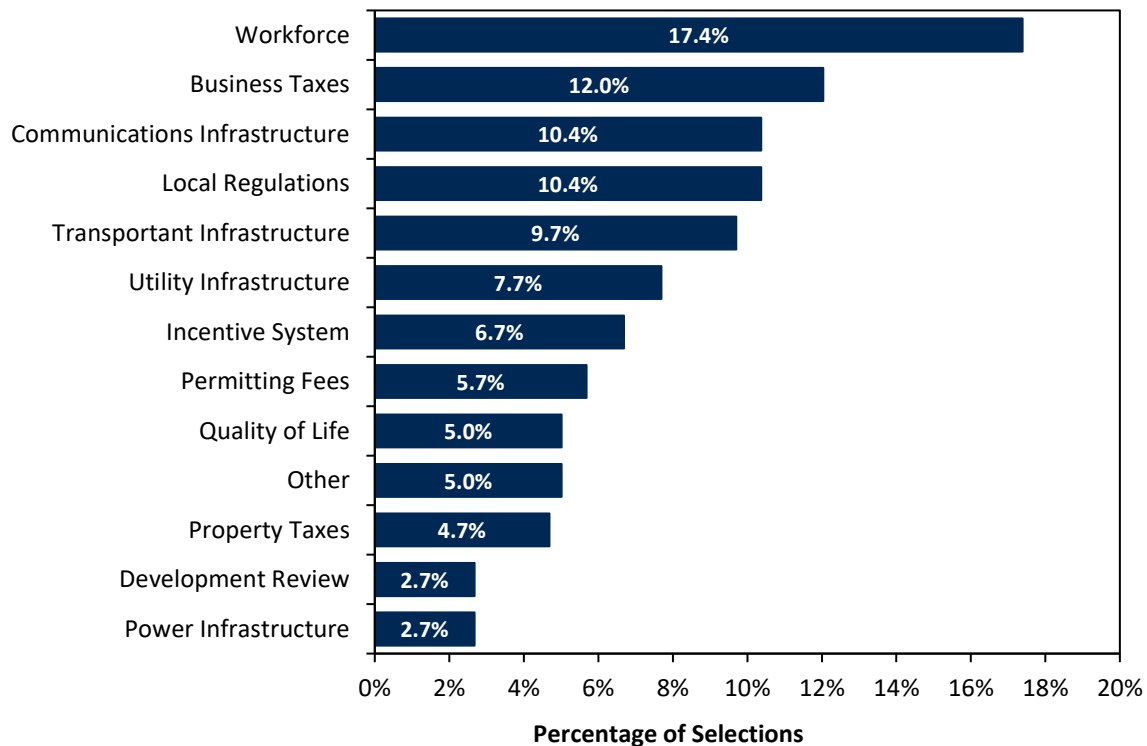
In this report, we discuss each of these strategies in detail. This includes a description of the current situation, a discussion of the input received related to that topic, and an outline of potential activities.

² Please see the other reports in this series for more details.

2 Workforce Training

Our research revealed a consensus that the long-term economic viability of the Wheeling region is dependent upon the quality of its workforce. Related to this, there is general agreement among survey respondents and stakeholders that the current state of the workforce does not reflect the educational needs of current or anticipated future employers. Thus, workforce training is a crucial focus area for development activities.

Figure 2: Most Important Impediments to Business and Economic Development in the Region³



As shown in Figure 2, the survey identified the region’s workforce as the leading impediment to business and economic development in the region out of 13 possible problems. Meanwhile, the recent workforce and education study of the Wheeling MSA (Ohio County, WV, Marshall County, WV, Belmont County, OH) found a predicted surplus of workers (supply being greater than demand) at all education levels. So, while it seems there are more than

“ I think the number one concern [is], and we hear that all the time, [why do we] have what appears to be a [good] supply of educated people, but yet we have business leaders concerned about workforce?”⁴

³ Reprinted from *Survey Results*.

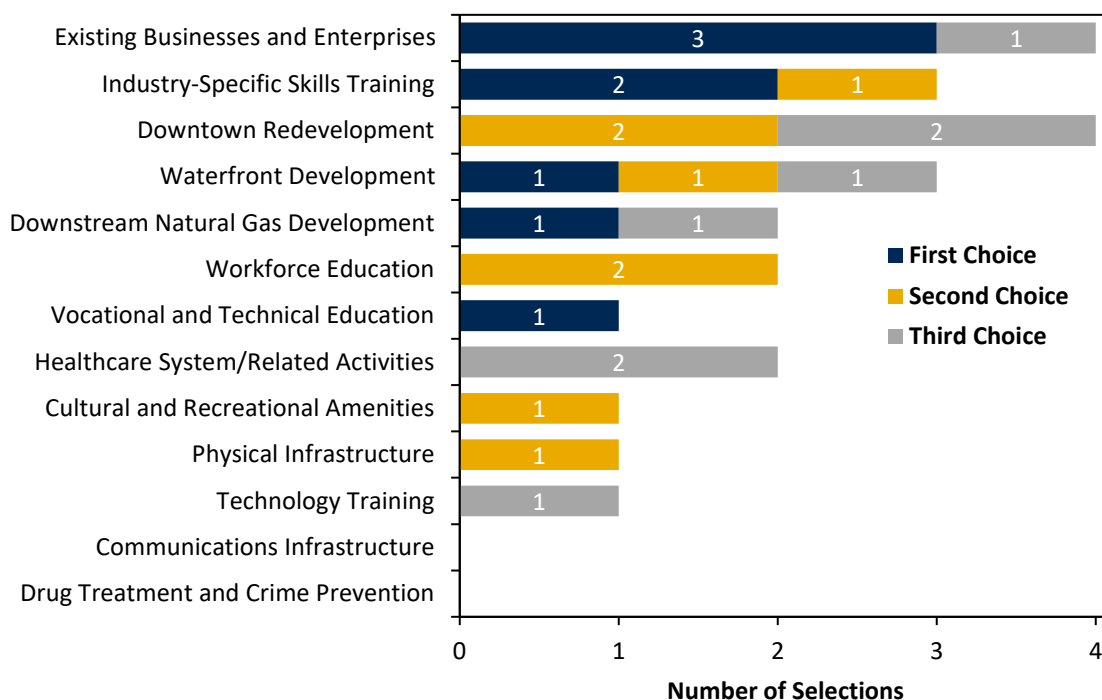
⁴ Quotes in this report are drawn from comments made by focus group participants in March 2021. They may have been condensed and edited for grammar.

enough workers to fill the jobs expected to be created in the next few years, business leaders and other stakeholders perceive that workers will not have the requisite training and skills for those positions.

The perception that worker education and training merits special attention can also be seen elsewhere. Survey respondents rated it fourth among eight potential focus areas for development activities. They also listed vocational and technical education as the most important of eight education types for the region. Meanwhile, in response to a question on the survey for business owners about the desired focus of workforce education efforts, industry-specific skills and technology skills tied for the top spot among 14 different categories.


Finally, the stakeholders expressed the need for this activity, but also expressed concerns about its possible results (see Figure 3). When asked to list their top three issues for the focus of regional development activities (in rank order), industry-specific skills training ranked second out of the 15 choices (using a weighted scoring model). Workforce education tied for fifth and vocational education placed seventh. Additionally, this dispersion of results may have been the result of different stakeholders interpreting the need differently. Six of the eight stakeholders listed one of these items in their top three focus areas. During their work session however, these same stakeholders wondered if the result of workforce training efforts would be preparing workers to move away to jobs elsewhere. This sentiment would explain the lower ratings for general technical education compared to specialized training (this also may reveal a bias toward working with the assets that already exist in the region, which corresponds to the redevelopment theme discussed below).

Figure 3: Focus Group Development Strategy Preferences



Source: BBER stakeholder focus group. Note: Items ranked by weighted preference as follows: first choice 3 points, second choice 2 points, and third choice 1 point.

Thus, it is necessary to create a better match between what workers can do and what employers need them to do. In other words, the connection between education and employment within the region needs to be strengthened. Whatever is done in this area needs to be focused so that it meets the current needs of existing firms while at the same time flexible enough so that it also prepares people for future position that might emerge in the region.

 *There are a lot of people coming out of those three universities in the area there. Unfortunately there's not necessarily a demand for them [in] the more technical specific type of jobs that we actually need, [in] our case: nurses and other clinical folks, and accountants, and people like that."*

2.1 Recommendations

DETERMINE SPECIFIC WORKER REQUIREMENTS OF LOCAL BUSINESSES: The current situation demonstrates that there is a mismatch between what employers need and what is available from current training efforts. But the variety of responses on inquiries about this issue also shows that there is no current consensus about exactly what specific training and education programs are needed in the region. Thus, before there can be any change in workforce preparation, there needs to be greater clarity as to what these proposed improvements would be. Businesses and industries must be specific in stating their desires if they want workers to possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities they feel are needed for their jobs.

Specifically, we recommend the following actions:

- Inventory current workforce training and education opportunities available in the area.
- Determine workforce training and education needs of area businesses and industries.
- Find gaps between what exists and what is desired with respect to workforce training and education.

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN FIRMS AND LOCAL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: Our research indicates that the region needs increased coordination between local employers and the technical colleges and vocational schools providing career education and workforce training. This type of coordination would allow for these education and training programs to be reworked and redesigned in such a way as to better reflect the needs of local firms rather than having a more general focus.

INCREASE RESOURCES TO TRANSFORM THESE IDEAS INTO TANGIBLE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES: Technical schools and junior colleges cannot not bear these costs alone. The businesses and industries in the region that will benefit from the specifically trained potential workers need to contribute to these efforts. Such involvement could take on several forms as it does not just have to be financial in nature. Other options include helping with instruction, providing equipment, or hosting training activities. They must be an active participant and investors in this process for it to be successful.

We recommend the following actions:

- Plan how to address the mismatch between existing and desired workforce training and education.
- Work with providers to reshape workforce training and education to ensure the programs meet expressed needs.

- Work with business and industry to provide support and resources for transformation of workforce training and education.
- Target apprenticeship-type training programs that lead directly to jobs at local companies.
- Pursue federal and state grants for targeted training.

3 Redevelopment Activities

To spur economic development, it often makes sense to build upon what already exists in the region. In the economic development realm, this can have two meanings. One is to emphasize business retention and expansion rather than recruitment. Another is to use and improve on existing places and features in a community. Both have implications for efforts in Wheeling.

While general employment trends in the region have been negative, several occupational areas are projected to see growth in the next several years. The Workforce and Education Analysis for the core of the region (Ohio County, Marshall County, and Belmont County) found that four industrial sectors are expected to grow at or above the overall regional growth rate: natural resources and mining, professional and business services, government, and manufacturing. As a result, several occupational categories are expected to have substantial job openings in the next few years: management, business, science and arts; services; sales and office; natural resources, construction, and maintenance; and production, transportation, and material moving (see Table 1). Any expansion that occurs in these industries could be used as building blocks for economic growth in the region. This is particularly true for sectors that could be considered base industries—such as retail trade and health care.

I think we can work on the things that we've been doing: the streetscape [project], some of the things we've done downtown here, I think it's been really exciting. We just [have] to continue to do those kinds of things, because it does build momentum for us."

Table 1: Estimated Job Openings by Occupation⁵

Occupation	Employment		Annual:			
	2019	2024	Job Growth	Exit	Transfer	Total Job Openings
Mgmt., Business, Science, and Arts	18,410	18,724	63	91	226	380
Services	14,857	15,037	36	151	203	390
Sales and Office	13,938	14,057	24	143	212	378
Nat. Res., Construct. & Maintenance	7,117	7,512	79	47	112	239
Production, Transp. & Material Moving	8,248	8,397	30	72	130	231
Total	62,570	63,728	232	504	882	1,618

Additionally, locational assets exist that can become the focus of redevelopment efforts. The Ohio River provides the region with waterfront development opportunities. Related to that, downtown amenities and activities enhance the quality of life for residents, which improves the likelihood and interest in focused improvement work in that area. Finally, former industrial and business sites that are in places with good infrastructure and utility connections can be transformed and reused.

⁵ Reprinted from *Workforce and Educational Assessment*.

The survey showed strong support for this type of building upon what already exists in the region. Among the 15 characteristics of the Wheeling region listed in the survey, its historic surroundings rated second, outdoor recreation rated third, and cultural amenities rated seventh.

“ I look at places like Chicago [and] Pittsburgh. We [have] much better weather than they do. We've got educational systems around here, the local universities [and] WVU [is] obviously not far away. We've got the river here. There are a lot of things here that are appealing and much more so appealing than other cities that have really grown.”

Several other findings from the survey support building on existing assets as well. Enhancing quality of life and improving regional infrastructure rated first and second respectively in the question about the importance of various development-related initiatives among the 12 possible choices. For the focus of development activities, business retention and expansion rated first, slowed by infrastructure improvement and community enhancement out of the eight areas listed. And for the nine land use issues, redevelopment of the downtown areas and central business district rated first, followed by sustainable development and historic preservation.

Similar points were stressed in the stakeholder discussions and ratings. During the forum, the general quality of life was noted, as were the streetscape projects and the riverfront in Wheeling. Redevelopment also came through as a central theme, be in downtown areas or brownfield sites. Meanwhile, in their ratings of the development focus of the area, existing business and enterprises ranked first (and had the highest number of first-place votes) while waterfront development and downtown redevelopment tied for third among the 14 categories considered.

“ The riverfront [is] a tremendous opportunity for us. There [are] a lot of things we could do. Cincinnati or some others really have built up the river restaurants, things like that. It takes some investment, take some risk. I think that could be another big catalyst because it's got a cool factor to it. And I think that would get people coming here on the weekends from Pittsburgh and Columbus. I just think if we were to put that money, doing streetscape [project] and finding a way to fund something like that, that can be a really nice catalyst.”

3.1 Recommendations

CONCENTRATE DEVELOPMENT ENERGIES ON THE EXISTING ASSETS OF THE REGION: This takes two forms.

The first is stressing the positives currently found in the region. This amenity-based development requires innovation and imagination. The focus on quality of life and other related aspects emphasizes making communities better places to live, work, and play. To achieve this, we recommend the following specific actions:

- Enhance experiences along riverfront with additional attractions, accommodations, and accessory shopping.
- Emphasize and expand existing quality of life focused stores and services.
- Develop (or recruit) firms that utilize the unique assets of the region -- entertainment, historical, cultural, etc. – and that could serve as attractors for residents and businesses.

PROMOTE TARGETED DEVELOPMENT AND REDEVELOPMENT: This aligns with the idea of focusing on things that can be controlled that stakeholders stressed. It also means prioritizing actions that will help the region move toward its desired future rather than randomly chasing development opportunities because they might have potential—or simply sound like a good idea when initially presented:

- Inventory vacant sites for potential brownfield redevelopment, reclamation, remediation.
- Protect, promote, and prop-up downtown central business district areas as potential places for people to live, shop, enjoy.
- Promote a multi-use redevelopment strategy that brings commercial and residential properties downtown.
- Seek conversion of excess large retail space to entertainment and experiential facilities that would enhance quality of life.
- Seek economic expansion through the development (or recruitment) enterprises that complement current base industries (such as suppliers to existing businesses, or end-users of products made or services offered in the region).

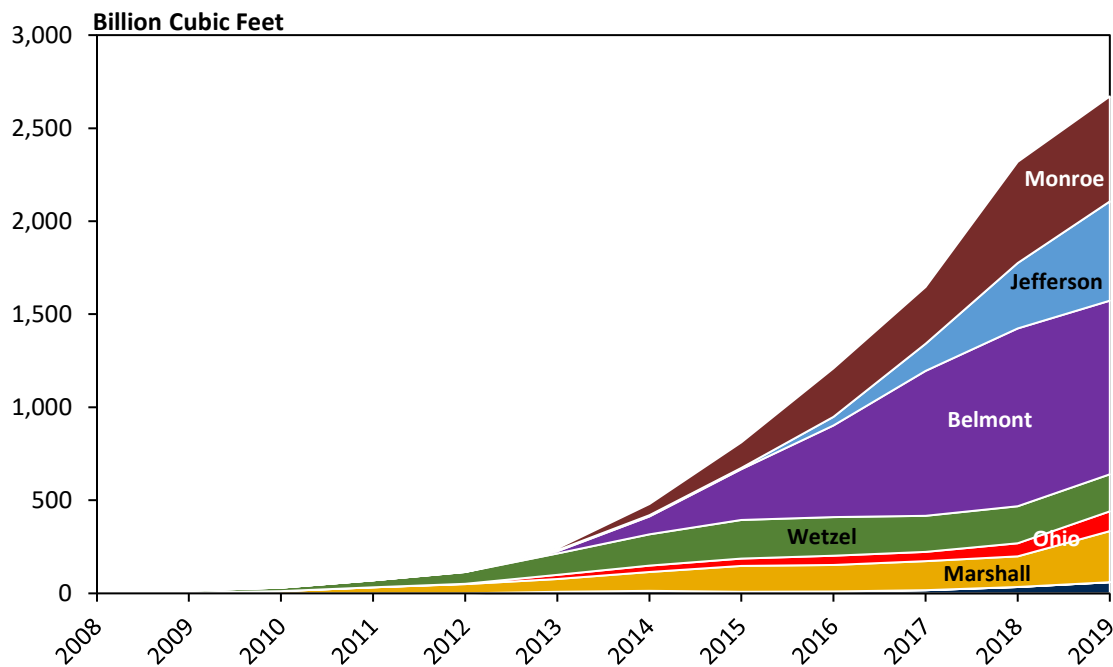
4 Industrial Clusters

Wheeling has a pair of traditional industries that could play a substantial role as the area moves forward. Natural gas exploration, extraction, and support; and health care have been basic industries in the region in recent years. Changing circumstances have affected each industry negatively, making it difficult to recommend either as an immediate focus for development activities. However, these sectors remain important parts of the regional economy and offer potential for long-term growth.

4.1 Natural Gas

In less than a decade, natural gas production in the Wheeling region went from virtually nothing (in 2010) to over 2.6 Trillion Cubic Feet (in 2019). Most of that production comes from the three Ohio counties in the Wheeling region: Belmont, Jefferson, and Monroe.

Figure 4: Natural Gas Production⁶



Source: WV Department of Environmental Protection. OH Department of Natural Resources.

Meanwhile, the 2017 Industrial Cluster Analysis shows Oil and Gas Production as a high-growth, high-wage high-impact industrial cluster in the region—as well as a cluster that has expansion possibilities because of the need for additional industrial support services in the region. Overall, oil and gas production employed 2,270 workers at 53 establishments with a location quotient of 3.6.

However, economic success based upon resource extraction can often be fleeting as the industry is known for its “boom-and-bust” cycles. First and foremost, hydrocarbon-based energy resources are

⁶ Reprinted from *Economic Profile*.

finite. In other words, production will rise, peak, and then fall. This could already be happening as US EIA data shows natural gas production in Ohio fell by almost 10 percent between 2019 and 2020 (from 2.65 to 2.40 Trillion cubic feet). It is unclear if this drop was associated with the result of decreased demand because of the COVID-19 or decreased available supply.

Related to this is the substitution effect. This is particularly evident when looking at the Ohio counties. Over the last decade, while natural gas production has increased substantially, coal production has all but stopped in Belmont and Jefferson counties while remaining relatively stable in Monroe County. So, in some ways, the expansion in one type of energy production could be a replacement for another type of energy production.

Additionally, the uncertainty surrounding the long-term future of natural gas production in the region has resulted in there being hesitancy in expanding the needed support services. For example, given that an ethane cracker plant—a facility that breaks down oil and natural gas into smaller molecules for energy and other industrial purposes—is under construction in relatively close by Beaver County, PA, the need for another such plant to serve the region will not be known for at least several more years.

Finally, despite the presence of a natural industrial cluster, there was not strong support to focus development efforts in this sector. In the survey, respondents ranked mining and energy production ninth out of 12 industrial sectors in terms of appropriateness. Meanwhile, when examining overall strengths and weaknesses, coal, gas, and energy production ranked sixth out of a list of 15 characteristics of the region.

Citing some of the same reasons as listed above, participants in the stakeholder work session appeared very cautious about focusing too much effort on energy-related development. One responded to the cluster analysis by noting that emphasis on oil-and-gas data seemed to reflect data from several years ago and that a lot of the work related to that effort had already been done. There was also

hesitancy because of the potential change in philosophy toward fossil fuels from the new presidential administration. Afterwards, the stakeholders rated downstream oil and gas development as the fifth choice among community stakeholders for the focus of regional development activities.

Despite these challenges, the natural gas industry may still provide significant development opportunities for the Wheeling region over the long term. The construction of a cracker plant in Beaver County, PA, offers opportunities for growth in downstream natural gas industries, such as polymers and chemicals, and the viability of an additional cracker in Belmont County will depend largely on the success of these industries in the Wheeling region. Though the future of natural gas and related industries is murky, it should remain a focus of development efforts.

4.2 Health Care

The situation surrounding the health care sector as a focus for development activities is even more jumbled. There are over 10,000 health services jobs in the region; however, employment in this cluster actually fell between 2007 and 2017. The region continues to be served by multiple hospitals and related facilities, but there has been a shift in recent years as regional networks and facility closures have reshaped the landscape.




There seemed to be a fair amount of emphasis placed on the oil and gas industry. And a lot of the data was from 2017. Just anecdotally it seems to me that activity has dropped off a good bit. I have not seen a lot of new drilling. I think most of the pipeline work is done.”

First, WVU Medicine has become the major player in the area. Recently, the 223-bed Wheeling Hospital officially joined WVU Medicine. The university health system had initially signed an agreement with the Catholic Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to operate the facility since June 2019. WVU also operates Reynolds Memorial Hospital in Glen Dale and Wetzel County Hospital in New Martinsville as well as providing provides management services to Barnesville Hospital.

Second, three hospitals that had each been in operation for over a century closed in 2019. In April of that year, Wheeling Hospital (at that time still an independent entity), closed the 99-bed Belmont Community Hospital in Bellaire because of years of declining usage. Then in September, Alecto Healthcare Services, a California-based for-profit company, shuttered Wheeling’s 200-bed Ohio Valley Medical Center and Martin Ferry’s 140-bed East Ohio Regional Hospital. The shutting down of OVMC also included adult and youth behavioral health units.

Alecto sold the Ohio hospital to psychiatrist and entrepreneur Dr. John Johnson in 2020 and it reopened as a hospital earlier this year. Meanwhile, the city acquired the Wheeling facility for redevelopment purposes. Overall, these closures have created opportunities and pressures for other facilities such as Trinity Health System in Steubenville, the Weirton Medical Center, and WVU Medicine’s hospitals.

 *In addition to oil and gas, we’ve got really great partners. [In] Ohio County specifically, we’ve got some really strong financial sector investments there. We’re home to WesBanco and Main Street Bank.”*

Complicating the situation even more is the COVID-19 pandemic. The worst global health crisis in a century has been problematic for health care providers. The need for personal protective equipment and other preventive measures has increased costs. The virus has also led to a reluctance to (or even a prohibition against) having elective procedures—a profit-center for many hospitals. The continued result has been additional closures and consolidations among facilities.

Prior to its recent reconfiguration, the analysis showed the importance of this impact cluster. The 2017 study showed it was by far the largest sector in the region, employing 10,740 people with 2,270 establishments. It was exhibiting moderate growth, provided good wages, and had a location quotient of 1.2.

Much of this activity has been and continues to be focused on Ohio County. It has the best ratios of medical professional to the population of any place in the eight-county study region. The number of residents per physician (600:1 in 2018) or per dentist (900:1 in 2019) place Ohio County among the top 10 percent counties in the country, according to the 2021 County Health Rankings data. (Hancock County also ranks placed among the top 10 for its ratio of dentists to residents.) Meanwhile, the number of residents per mental health professional (310:1 in 2020) place the county just outside the top 10 percent. It should be noted that this data does not reflect any changes in medical providers that might have occurred recently as a result of the hospital closures and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both the survey and the stakeholder discussions provided mixed guidance. In the rating of overall strengths and weaknesses, health care ranked 12th out of the list of 15 characteristics. of the region. Likewise, stakeholders rated health care system and related activities in a tie for 8th out of 11 focus areas for development activities.

There was some support for the survey respondents rated health care the second-most appropriate industry type for the region (education ranked first). Also, stakeholders specifically noted the importance of the WVU Medicine partnership, especially with respect to nursing.

Overall, health care has both problems and potential. The perpetual need for health care services and the size of the workforce for this activity means it is not going to disappear. The changing dynamics on where and how these services are provided will have a profound effect on the future of this sector. What that means for the Wheeling region is unknown. Since it could be a profound positive for the region, decisions in other areas should be made in such a way that they do not preclude future support for enhancement or expansion this sector. This will permit considerations for the health care sector to remain present in development efforts.

4.3 Recommendations

Natural gas and health care are two very different industries. But their current situations are quite similar. Both have had and continue to have a large presence within the region. But neither has been identified as a target area for current development activities (in the survey or in the stakeholders' discussions), in part because the two industries are thought to have limited growth potential at present.

With all these uncertainties, it is difficult to recommend that development activities in the Wheeling region focus on these impact clusters. External factors will substantially influence the viability of activities in these clusters. Nevertheless, both energy and health care have great potential for the future growth. So, actions in other areas should not preclude being able to pivot and work on these issues if circumstances warrant. Note that for both clusters, how the region is eventually defined (see below) may have an impact on whether and to what degree these clusters will be important moving forward. Specific action steps are listed below.

For the natural gas cluster, we recommend the following actions:

- Monitor energy production, reserves, and market to determine potential for sector or expansion.
- Work with key policymakers to ensure continued and future viability of the energy industry in the region.
- Evaluate the utilization of ethane cracker plant under construction in Pennsylvania.
- Retain a focus on downstream natural gas industries, such as polymers and chemicals, over the long run.

For the health care cluster, we recommend the following actions:

- Monitor utilization of health care facilities and services to determine market demand.
- Support medical workforce training efforts to serve existing and potential facilities.
- Encourage health care providers to expand into underutilized fields within the market to offer greater diversity of services.

5 Regional Identity

Nothing discussed above will truly matter, however, if there continues to be a lack of consensus on what makes up the “Wheeling region.” It is essential to define the region before undertaking any other activity. However, there is no consensus on what is included in such a region.

To illustrate this point, when conducting this research, we encountered a wide range of examples of how to define the Wheeling region. In Figure 5, we show the region as defined in this series of reports, with the Wheeling MSA highlighted in blue.

Figure 5: Greater Wheeling Counties



However, several other agencies and studies have different definitions of the Wheeling area, including the following:

- The Wheeling Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) includes three counties: Belmont, Ohio, and Marshall. Meanwhile, Brooke, Hancock, and Jefferson counties are part of the Weirton-Steubenville MSA, which are part of the larger Pittsburgh-New Castle-Weirton Combined Statistical Area. (Two counties are not part of metropolitan or micropolitan areas: Wetzel and Monroe.)

- West Virginia’s Northern Panhandle is commonly thought to include Brooke, Hancock, Ohio, and Marshall counties.
- The Belmont-Ohio-Marshall Transportation Study is the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the Wheeling MSA (similarly, the Brooke Hancock Jefferson Metropolitan Planning Commission is the MPO for the Weirton-Steubenville MSA).
- Belmont, Ohio, Marshall, and Wetzel counties make up the Belomar Regional Council.
- RED, the Regional Economic Development Partnership, has a three-county service of Ohio, Marshall, and Wetzel.
- The Business Development Corporation of the Northern Panhandle serves Brooke and Hancock counties.
- Other regional alignments in West Virginia that include Wheeling are six county regions: Hancock, Brooke, Ohio, Marshall, and Wetzel from the study area along with Tyler. One example is Workforce Board 5; this is important for workforce development and labor market information). Another is the state’s Northern Panhandle Travel Region; this is important for tourism development and inventorying amenity-based activities.

While this plan has a wide scope and the city is part of several other multi-county regions, many people have a more limited perspective. More than 70 percent of the respondents to the survey listed Ohio County (the location of Wheeling) as their location while no other county had as much as 10 percent of respondents. Likewise, the Executive Committee of the Wheeling Area Chamber of Commerce is Wheeling-centric as well (as this group includes the primary plan stakeholders, the statement also applies to them.)

So what does Wheeling mean? The city itself has multiple identifies. To history buffs, Wheeling is the city of West Virginia’s formation and the state’s first capital city. To an older generation of radio listeners, Wheeling is known by the call letters of its clear-channel radio station (WWVA) that once brought country music to over half the country through its 50,000-watt signal and for many years served as the broadcast home of the Wheeling Jamboree program. To current fans of winter sports, it is home to one of over two-dozen teams in the eclectic ECHL, a hockey minor league that features teams in small cities and major league metropolises from the Atlantic to the Rockies (and previously all the way to Alaska).

“If you look at the city and just even the region, there’s always a good quality of life. For [a] metropolitan area of this size we’ve got the largest city park in the country, we’ve got our own symphony, we’ve got a professional hockey team. And the downtown, we’ve got a great WesBanco Arena.”

To move forward, there must be an agreement on what the “the Wheeling region” entails. Likewise, there needs to be a consensus on what the Wheeling means (or should mean) to people. In other words, the region needs to have a definite scope (development identity) and scale (geographical definition). This will require those involved to reach a consensus on the theme and location – the what and where – for development activities. Also, as noted above, both the results of the survey and stakeholder both noted the need to focus development activities on the quality of life and benefits to the area.

Once the region has been defined and delineated, steps will need to be taken to publicize the region and its identity to promote the desired development. One obvious first step would be the creation of a unified database for potential sites. Presently, such listings exist, but they are dispersed depending on the location and type of site. For example, looking at Wheeling (Ohio County), the West Virginia

Development Office lists industrial locations. RED lists potential commercial and office facilities. The Belomar Regional Council hosts information on potential brownfield sites and transportation access. The situation becomes increasingly complicated as additional localities are examined – especially if those places are in Ohio. Related to this is the need to ensure coordination with the state agencies and entities that play a role in development in the region as well.

To help better define the unified Wheeling region, we recommend the following actions:

- Determine what is meant by “the Wheeling Region” through stakeholder discussion supported by data analysis.
- Focus marketing (both to the public and to potential “investors”) on this “defined region.”
- Create database information systems that identify the situation and potential for the region.
- Only consider (undertake) activities, investments, and endeavors that work in and for that region.

6 Implementation Steps

The four activities listed herein are discrete but also interconnected. And they are also listed in the reverse order of when they need to begin.

Before anything else is done, the Wheeling region must be defined. There is substantial difference between working in a single county versus three counties, versus five or six counties, versus eight counties. This decision must be made almost immediately. It influences all other activities and defines available assets and resources.

For example, if a decision is made to move forward with a three-county region based upon the current MSA (Ohio, Marshall, and Belmont counties), it could have numerous impacts. For the industrial clusters, health care would still be a possible focus because most of the current medical activities are in that area; natural gas exploration may not be as feasible since it takes the production of the larger region to be a viable alternative. For the redevelopment activities, work will be done on a smaller scale but many of the pieces for the proposed broader vision of economic development are still present. For workforce training, while many of industries discussed would still need to receive attention, the exact mix would be defined by the places included. Looking at the three counties in the MSA, this training is more likely to focus on the super sectors of Education and Health Services and Trade, Transportation, and Utilities and less likely to focus on Leisure and Hospitality and Construction based on current employment levels. Interestingly, the main potential providers—West Virginia Northern Community College and Belmont Community College—would remain the same as they are in the three-county area.

Once the region has been determined, the other activities can follow. Monitoring the future potential of the current clusters can begin almost immediately thereafter and continue indefinitely. The decision to pursue the clusters as an opportunity, continue monitoring, or move in a different direction can be made at almost any time. This could be done by the chamber in consultation with appropriate other development entities.

The redevelopment activities would take longer. Planning for them would take a few months for smaller projects to several years for more involved efforts that involve reclamation, remediation, or replacement. This would need to involve other development authorities, property owners, and site experts for situations where there are specialized needs or concerns related to the properties or project.

The workforce training is the most involved of these proposed activities. The initial steps of taking an inventory of current efforts and determining industry needs should begin soon. That data will take several months to collect and analyze. Those results will be used to instruct the efforts to develop new educational efforts. Development entities, current business and industries, and workforce training providers (including junior college, technical colleges, and vocational schools) would all play prominent roles in this activity.

Overall, these four activities will help determine the future development direction for the Wheeling Region. Once the region is defined, work related to the other three themes can commence in earnest and move the area in the desired direction for the future.

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