

White House representative listens and informs in local panel

By Tiffany Sokolowski

Staff Writer & Marketing Coordinator

The Benham School House Inn played host to Jason Walsh, Senior White House Policy Advisor, and more than 50 people representing a range of organizations and including civic and political leaders. Local resident, Robert Gipe, moderated the program.

Walsh said, “We are in the middle of a very profound energy transformation in this country and that is producing a lot of good things: cleaner air, new jobs, etc., but it is also impacting communities and workers who have relied on coal particularly as a source for jobs and sustainability [...] and nowhere is it felt more significantly than here.”

He discussed the creation of The Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) Initiative which is intended to help “communities adapt to the changing energy landscape and build a better future; the President’s FY 2016 Budget proposed the POWER+ Plan. The POWER+ Plan invests in workers and jobs, addresses important legacy costs in coal country, and drives development of coal technology.”

“Anything that is going to be impactful has to start from a solid plan,” said Walsh and the President wants to make this plan successful.

Walsh talked about energy programs like Benham \$aves and other power initiatives that are helpful to the community and how these programs need to be utilized.

Local artist Lacy Hale told Walsh that we need to start in schools to help develop art students and teach them business skills. Students in late high school to 20 years old need to learn on how to make a business from their art. Hale said there is a lack of training in the area.

“Supporting the artist but also supporting the community in which they live,” said Gipe, “is one way to show the support... Public support by public work is a good place to put our money.”

Panel member’s discussions with Walsh included the following highlights:

- Blake Enlow with COAP, Inc., based in Harlan, discussed energy efficiency and savings for homeowners; Benham \$aves, a retrofitting program through the Benham Power Board.
- Chris Porter said MACED provides direct service to 54 counties, a multi-strategy approach to create a sustainable economy. They have been working with a program called “How Smart Kentucky” partnering with local energy boards.
- Gerry Roll with The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky said her organization uses the community foundation to attract resources and put those resources back into the community.

- Harlan County Community Foundation Executive Director Ed Harris said their focus is on four things: economic development, health, education and the Arts. They also fundraise through Amazon.com.
- Marvin Richards, Executive Director of Community Farm Alliance, called himself a “recovering farmer.” The Grassroots Foundation is celebrating 30 years with 1500 members. Richards reminded us that before we mined coal and before we drilled for gas, we were farmers.
- Valerie Horn represented Grow Appalachia which supports 100 growers/gardeners in Letcher County. She also reported that UK’s Apple Tree project gave filtered water bottle stations to schools. They also have worked on a summer feeding program.
- Lacey Hale, co-founder and coordinator of EpiCentre Arts, strives to create opportunities. She said that the chair of the National Endowment for the Arts requested to come to eastern Kentucky because 6 out of the 9 recipients of the NEA’s Kentucky funding were from the eastern portion of the state. Hale said the people are creative here and we need to utilize that. Art entrepreneurship training is needed.
- Devin Creech of Higher Ground said her organization collects oral histories from communities and they turn that oral history into productions and have been doing this for more than a decade. Higher Ground supplies the youth with the means to find a future here and have worked with ages ranging from infants to 80 years old. They are a big supporter of youth involvement.
- A very involved Benham citizen, Andrea Massey, told a little history about the area including the Benham Inn, the Coal Mining Museum, the Portal 31 Mine Tour, Betty Howard Coal Mining Theatre, and her work at Southeast Community & Technical College.
- Stephanie Tyree, Director of Community Engagement and Policy at The Hub of West Virginia said her organization believes the most successful work is comprehensive and integrated work. They take integrated approaches to economic development to the region. They have a history in this region of federal funding and support with mixed results and The Hub is hopeful that the power initiative takes a different approach with greater success.
- Kendall Bilbrey with The Stay Project said we need to appreciate our culture instead of running away from it. Utilize social media and #AppalachianLoveStory when you see something that fits the bill for Eastern Kentucky.
- Ada Smith works with Appalshop Gallery in Whitesburg and what once was a workforce development program from a small grant 50 years ago has turned into a million-dollar operation with 20 plus employees. They help preserve pieces of history that have been in the community since the early 1900s.