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Jacob Keeney
Business Development
Corporation of the
Northern Panhandle

Jacob Keeney is the Executive Director of Development for the Business Development Corporation of the Northern Panhandle (BDC), a private, not-for-profit, economic development organization representing Brooke and Hancock Counties, West Virginia. In his role at the BDC, Keeney's focus is job creation, which takes many forms including brownfield redevelopment, business attraction, infrastructure investment, and just about everything in between. Keeney has been with the BDC for just over three years and has helped the organization attract over \$800 million in private investment for the region. He holds both a bachelor's and master's degree in Environmental Science and Land Management.

Rising from the Rust: A 10 Year Plan That is Working

In recent years, the two smallest and northernmost counties in West Virginia have been undergoing a remarkable transformation that has captured the attention of both residents and outsiders alike. Once a representation of the Rust Belt's decline, Brooke and Hancock Counties are now experiencing a renaissance in economic development that is revitalizing the community and offering a glimmer of the prosperous future to come for the entire Northern Panhandle region.

The region's economic history is a testament to the challenges faced by many Rust Belt communities. For decades, its prosperity was closely tied to the steel industry, with the Weirton Steel Corporation and Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Corporation serving as the economic backbone. However, as the American Steel industry declined, a slew of plant closures and job losses ensued.



the communities, one which is being used to attract even more businesses considering the bountiful opportunities that exist.

One of many notable examples is Form Energy, which is in the process of establishing an iron-air battery manufacturing facility in the heart of downtown Weirton that formerly housed iron and steelmaking operations of the Weirton Steel Corporation. The \$760 million dollar investment is slated to add 750 jobs by the end of 2028, employing existing residents

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Despite those challenges, through perseverance, partnerships, and the natural and industrial assets, the region is beginning to look like the comeback kid. A key driver of this has been the revival of American manufacturing into new and emerging technologies. Recent groundbreakings and ribbon-cutting ceremonies for major employers now calling West Virginia home has spurred a new wind of optimism within

and bringing new talent and their families to the community. Similarly, investments by Pure Watercraft at the Beech Bottom Industrial Park, a former Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel asset in Brooke County, are generating excitement. The company will begin manufacturing all-electric pontoon boats and propulsion systems at the existing facility in the coming months. This investment brings with it at least 100 jobs by the end of 2025.

OUR RESULTS



3,400

Jobs Created Since 2009



\$96M

Grants and Loans Awarded since 2009



\$603M

Investment since 2009



5.55%

Pre-COVID Unemployment Rate in Feb. 2020



5.1%

Current Unemployment Rate in Mar. 2022



\$41

Private investment leveraged for every \$1
from EDA & EPA

While the region is experiencing a surge of new technologies and innovations, the value-added metals sector that has been a pillar of the community for generations is showing signs of new investment itself. In the fall of 2020, Gruppo Fanti, a Bologna, Italy-based metal packaging company selected Weirton for its first investment into the U.S. Market. Specializing in the production of steel paint and aerosol cans, its U.S. entity, Fanti USA, will begin manufacturing production this fall, employing over 40 employees through its \$30 million dollar investment.

All these exciting investments did not happen overnight. As small communities in West Virginia know, attracting large employers is challenging and arguably requires more leg work than that of our neighboring states due to the lack of flat land and associated infrastructure challenges. While the Northern Panhandle has more agreeable terrain than other parts of the state, it too has struggled with the availability of developable land, but in a different vein. For years, much of the developable land in the region was riddled with contaminated brownfields and old factories that were vacant for decades.

In 2012, the local economic development organization for Brooke and Hancock Counties, the Business Development Corporation of the Northern Panhandle (BDC), charted a course to acquire property or partner with existing property owners to assess, remediate, plan, and redevelop those

brownfields. With such an inventory of sites, the BDC started its work one property at a time, utilizing various grants and loans and leveraging an array of private investment and partnerships. Eventually, the BDC and its partners were able to place seven large industrial properties into the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection's Voluntary Remediation Program and receive Certificates of Completion, signifying full site remediation to industrial standards and a release of liability from historic contamination. A process that took 10 years to achieve allowed the properties to become marketable for the right opportunity, and that opportunity is striking hot across the state — with the help of the West Virginia Department of Economic Development and the West Virginia Economic Development Authority.

Each investment noted earlier is taking shape on a former brownfield site that was previously seen as a blight in the community. This is to say that diamonds in the rough do exist, and with the proper vision and partnerships can come new opportunities for community and economic revitalization. Not every region has the same challenges, but often what is perceived as being the largest obstacle to economic development is just ten years and a lot of partnerships away from new life. That has been the story so far with Brooke and Hancock Counties, but the best is yet to come as the region rises from the rust. 