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FALL/WINTER 2023





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Top of West Virginia
Convention and
Visitors Bureau

Rachel Keeney is the Executive Director for the Top of West Virginia Convention and Visitors Bureau, the destination marketing organization for Brooke and Hancock Counties, West Virginia. With a background in graphic design and marketing and communication, Keeney is focused on reframing the overall tourism and marketing strategy for both counties through her collaborative efforts with community stakeholders. She also serves on the board of the Hancock and Brooke Young Professionals as a founding member, as well as the steering committee for the Ohio Valley Chapter of Women for Economic and Leadership Development.

Industrial History Shapes Tourism's Future

Breathtaking mountains and waterfalls, scenic trails, and winding rivers – these are just a few of the stunning landmarks that come to mind for most people when they think of West Virginia. Thanks to the massive efforts put forth by the state's tourism industry to promote West Virginia's natural beauty, the state is finally recognized as a travel destination both nationally and internationally. At the top of West Virginia's Northern Panhandle, however, our strategy is a little different.

Outdoor enthusiasts can still get their fix of camping, hiking, biking, and kayaking at Tomlinson Run State Park, but the industrial history of Brooke and Hancock Counties sets us apart from the rest of the state. Since the mid-1800s, West Virginia's two smallest counties have embraced industrial development, giving rise to rail lines and several major highways



new businesses to locate in those industrial buildings. Our goal is to attract the kind of visitors that are interested in our history, want to see the mechanics of manufacturing, and want to know how our small river towns developed. The CVB's target audience wants to eat at the authentic, locally owned restaurants started by the families of the Italian, Serbian, and Greek immigrants that came to work in

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along the Ohio River. Pottery, glass, brick, and steel manufacturers attracted first generation immigrants to settle with their families in the Upper Ohio Valley. The decline of some of these industries, however, resulted in underutilized mills throughout the region.

Many people may not find the old, industrial buildings to be as attractive as our state's natural resources, counting the Northern Panhandle out as a destination. But rather than shy away from the smokestacks and factories, the Top of West Virginia Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) has structured its marketing plan to lean into these assets, and local development groups are attracting

our mills. Visitors inquire about what happened in all the old buildings, and we can appease their curiosity through industrial tourism.

To do this effectively, the CVB partners with community stakeholders such as the Fiesta Tableware Company. The pottery factory located in Newell, West Virginia is the sole production site of Fiesta's signature dinnerware. The colorful dishes are easily recognized worldwide, but many are unaware of where or how they're made. Visitors to the factory are offered tours, allowing them to watch the mesmerizing machinery churn out mass quantities of American-made pottery. Marketing the product itself is one aspect, but



by partnering with the CVB to promote their factory tours and tent sales, Fiesta attracts travelers to small-town Newell year after year.

Lately, the CVB's target audience has expanded to include business tourism. A recent surge in manufacturers relocating to the region has sparked a new initiative for the CVB: hospitality is fundamental for tourism, but is also vital to local economic development. The CVB, in collaboration with local development groups, is providing prospective businesses with materials about the area's attractions, restaurants, shops, arts and culture, and history during their first visit to the area. Once the new business has been secured and announced, the CVB becomes a main point of contact for the manufacturers and their construction contractors to ensure hotel and food accommodations are sourced within West Virginia. In turn, local hotels are providing occupancy data to the CVB, relative to specific contractor projects to allow for more effective tracking of a business's impact on the local economy.

Increased business activities have also called for the revival of a local project that has laid dormant for a few years: the Weirton

Conference Center. The City of Weirton began looking into the feasibility of constructing a conference center in 2016 and was awarded USEDA funding to create infrastructure and roadways for the center. Designated as a TIF district by the West Virginia Department of Economic Development, the future conference center location is directly off U.S. Route 22, sandwiched between Pennsylvania and Ohio, appealing to an out-of-state market. During the pandemic, however, the project fell to the wayside. With meetings and conferences once again on the rise, the CVB is focused on completing the conference center now more than ever.

Brooke and Hancock Counties have limited event space and have no venue for indoor gatherings of over 200-250 people. Partnering with the Business Development Corporation (BDC), the CVB conducted a USEPA-funded updated feasibility study in March of 2023 to determine the necessity of the conference center. Currently, funding from USDA is allowing the partners to begin preliminary architectural design and civil engineering. The CVB is still working on developing the capital stack for conference center construction, consisting of an \$11-13 million loan, likely from federal or state grants and TIF financing. The Weirton Conference Center will not only serve the existing demand for meeting space, but will assist with diversifying the local economy by actively attracting conferences and events to the state and region.

The Ohio River Valley is at the beginning of a resurgence, and it's taking off quickly. The CVB is celebrating industrial tourism as a way of diversifying the local economy, but others are starting to see the area's potential and want to capitalize on the momentum. By exploring new projects and partnerships, opportunities are created to attract visitors and businesses from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and beyond. 