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Jason Pizatella
Contractors Association
of West Virginia

Jason Pizatella is the Chief Executive Officer of the Contractors Association of West Virginia, which represents 475 businesses and approximately 20,000 employees in the building, highway, and utility contracting industries. A graduate of WVU and the WVU College of Law, Jason practiced law with Spilman Thomas & Battle before joining CAWV in 2022. He served in numerous leadership roles during the administrations of Governors Manchin, Tomblin, and Justice. He has held the positions of Deputy State Tax Commissioner, Acting Secretary of the Department of Revenue, and Acting Secretary of the Department of Administration.

Building Up Workforce Participation Rate Through Education

Whoever said bipartisanship is dead has not been paying attention to the investments in West Virginia's infrastructure. From the Roads to Prosperity constitutional amendment overwhelmingly approved by voters in 2017, to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act passed by Congress in 2021, to the Economic Enhancement Grant Fund created by the Legislature in 2022, the effects of these generationally significant policy initiatives are being felt in our communities. They are certainly being felt throughout the construction industry. Collectively, these programs will inject over \$8 billion into the West Virginia economy over the next several years.

The Contractors Association of West Virginia (CAWV) has historically promoted the direct connection between increased investment in infrastructure and job creation. These jobs, and the investments that go along with them,



every year, a familiar theme emerges: low workforce participation. West Virginia's lagging workforce participation rate, and ways to reverse it, is something that keeps me, and I'm sure many others, up at night. In his most recent presentation to the Legislature,

“Collectively these programs will inject over \$8 billion into the West Virginia economy over the next several years.”

improve the quality of life for everyone who calls the Mountain State home. The private sector has also taken notice. Companies like Nucor Steel, Form Energy, Berkshire Hathaway Energy Renewables, Mountaintop Beverage, Precision Castparts Corp., Green Power Motors, and many more have stepped up in a big way to make West Virginia what it is today.

Every year before the beginning of the 60-day legislative session, legislators hear the state's economic outlook presentation. And

Professor John Deskins at the West Virginia University John Chambers College of Business and Economics emphasized the latest numbers in a way that only he can. In fact, he said, “There's no way that we can have economic prosperity on par with the nation with that statistic.”

Nonetheless, CAWV is doing its part to reverse these trends. We have no other choice. Workforce development is a critical focus for the association. We continue to foster partnerships with the Department of

Education Office of Technical and Adult Education and the various Community and Technical Colleges throughout West Virginia that are training the next generation. It almost goes without saying, but the more young people we can convince to consider a career in construction, the more likely they are to join the industry. And for those individuals that may have encountered a barrier to employment at some point along the way, the construction industry has been one of the biggest supporters of (not to mention the largest employers of) graduates from Governor Justice's highly successful Jobs and Hope program.



One of the many benefits of CAWV membership is access to the resources of the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC). AGC's Constructor magazine recently published a summary of its workforce participation survey that it conducts annually with partner Autodesk. In a recent commentary on the subject, the former Chief Executive Officer of AGC argued that it might be time to "rethink the way the nation educates and prepares workers." What stood out to me most was not the argument he was making, but rather how strikingly similar it was to what I've heard around the West Virginia Legislature in the past few years. For those looking for a good-paying job in the Mountain State, it's hard to say with a straight face today that they cannot find one. What is sometimes harder to find, however, is a high school guidance counselor that is willing to admit that there are multiple pathways to job success in West Virginia. Often, this pathway is the construction industry. What we have often encountered is resistance to getting away from the longstanding view that a four-year college degree is the only way to achieve success. CAWV has always advocated for alternative programs that expose students to the opportunities and skills needed for good-paying careers in the construction industry quickly and with very little to no debt.

The new "Build It Up" educational initiative, developed by the association's Workforce Development Task Force and Education



Committee, wrapped up its inaugural program in three fifth-grade classrooms in Putnam County. Build It Up represents a big step forward in preparing the state's youth for careers in the construction trades while simultaneously helping to fortify its workforce challenges. As a cornerstone of the broader CAWV "Build West Virginia" initiative, Build It Up seeks to inspire a new generation of builders by offering immersive, hands-on experiences that transcend the confines of traditional classroom learning. The program allows students to explore the multi-faceted world of construction, presenting it not just as a career choice, but as a gateway to personal fulfillment and community prosperity. Build It Up will expand in the Fall 2024 semester with plans to reach even more schools and more students across West Virginia in the very near future.

Finally, once these men and women join the industry, we have to make sure we keep them and teach them the skills necessary to be future leaders in the industry. One of the most important new benefits the CAWV provides its members is access to the annual Construction Leadership Program. The goal of this program is to equip participants with the knowledge, perspective, and tools to lead effectively within their respective companies. The inaugural class began in January 2023, where they heard from various speakers on topics that covered everything from essential leadership skills to the basics of how a construction business works. Substantive courses throughout the year include contract documents, insurance, risk management, performance bonds, the bidding process, professional ethics, and conflict resolution.

The fact is, we do not have an association without our members and we are doing everything we can to invest in their futures and the future of our organization. ▽