

SPORTS FEED



Erienne Olesh: Our region needs a lot more energy

ERIEENNE OLESH
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In my home in the West Virginia hills, there's rarely a sustained electrical outage, but there are many quick ones. If it's daytime, I usually know the grid has failed because I hear it: a series of clicks as the machinery of my house shuts down, then a chorus of beeps and whirs as it springs back to life.

People I know from more rural areas, though, have generators and oil lamps ready for winter storms to take down multiple power lines and leave them without electricity for days.

But power lines will soon be the least of our region's energy worries. Rising energy demand and energy costs will be.

Exploring answers

The Resilient Energy Technology and Infrastructure Consortium, led by West Virginia University with the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, is exploring answers while representing the needs and interests of western Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Over 60 partners — energy companies, workforce developers, investors, entrepreneurs, nonprofits, government agencies — have shared their expertise on our local energy economy with us.

Here's what I've learned as CEO of RETI:

First, within the decade, American industrial demand for electricity will likely exceed supply by 50%. And that's just the demand from industry. Other additional stressors, from electric cars to data centers, will make their own unprecedented demands of the power grid.

Second, energy costs for our region will increase. And even though this area benefits from many high-voltage connections, thanks to our history of industrial manufacturing, we'll still face bottlenecks.

Third, western Pennsylvania and West Virginia have the ingredients to spearhead rapid innovation to meet these urgent problems: grid infrastructure, industrial bases, and research universities with deep expertise in AI, energy systems, robotics and automation.

The barriers

Fourth, the tech sector has an expanding presence here in the form of Amazon Web Services and NVIDIA. Essential Utilities has invested \$26 million in a Greene County, Pennsylvania, data center. Construction for natural gas generation has been announced for the former Homer City, Pennsylvania, coal power station.

Companies like Mitsubishi, Hitachi, Eaton and Emerson are well-positioned to address critical needs like domestic production of large power transformers. And affordable energy is one of our strengths — we're among the top five energy-producing regions in the U.S.

Fifth, after decades of losses in jobs, investments and population, Pennsylvania ranks 23rd and West Virginia ranks 50th in the country in venture capital funding relative to GDP. That failure to gain investment capital has hindered innovation and industrial growth.

Sixth, our workforce, with its lack of training in specialized skills, has been a barrier. Consider Abridge, a startup backed by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's venture fund. It's moving to Silicon Valley because it cannot hire fast enough in Pittsburgh.

Seventh, regulation is fragmented. Stakeholders tell me both states would benefit from offices empowered to grant approvals for major projects and from the creation of a body for expediting approvals that cross state boundaries.

Our opportunities

Investment, workforce and policy — those are our opportunities.

Right now, the National Science Foundation is in the final stages of considering 15 finalists for a Regional Innovation Engines award of \$160 million. RETI is one of those finalists. If RETI is successful in our bid for an NSF Engines award, the result will be an estimated 21,000 jobs, 150 startups and more than \$1 billion dollars in economic growth for this region.

And the NSF funding would unlock an additional \$161 million in support that RETI has lined up from industry, investor and workforce entities.

With the NSF award, Pennsylvania and West Virginia could incentivize, de-risk and augment investment capital for startups, and potentially create state venture funds. That's especially important here, where the small and medium-sized manufacturers who predominate mainly rely on bank financing, and where only 2% of funds raised by local companies come from local sources, compared to the 15 to 20% typical in other places.

The NSF funding would provide innovators with access to advisors and exposure to regional customer needs.

It would create bespoke training programs for high schools and community colleges, reducing the need for employers to hire out of state.

With NSF support, West Virginia and Pennsylvania could develop an inventory of sites with "pre-permitted" uses and support the creation of a permitting "strike team" of governmental and private sector leaders.

Our region has the power. We are a historic energy producer. We continue to serve that need for our country. This NSF award could drive everything from early-stage R&D to helping mature new tech into meaningful startups that will move our energy resilience forward.

RETI researchers have already begun pioneering the use of hydrogen in steel production and plastics recycling. They've already developed machine-learning algorithms and grid storage systems to ensure our power supply remains robust and secure. They're already innovating technologies that reduce the energy use and physical footprints of chemical manufacturing plants.

With \$160 million backing them up, imagine what they could accomplish for us.

Erienne Olesh is the CEO of Resilient Energy Technology and Infrastructure Consortium, and the executive director of the West Virginia University Office of Innovation and Commercialization.

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