

# **Litter's Impact on the Economy of Southwest Virginia**

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Commission

When one thinks of economic development and the ingredients that might be necessary to be successful in that field, essentials like business parks, good highways, labor training programs and supporting infrastructure come to the minds of most people. Certainly, all of those basic factors are givens. But, there are equally important issues that factor just as heavily into affirmative decisions of the business community to locate in this region, or any other region. They range from the quality of public education and the academic status of the labor force, the general attractiveness and safety of our communities, ample housing opportunities, cultural amenities, and the many other quality of life issues that define a region as a great place to live and to work. Somewhere in that list of important collateral issues is litter control. The presence of it makes an ugly statement about who we are as a region and what we think of ourselves, as a people. The absence of it suggests the region is populated by hard working souls with a solid work ethic and pride in themselves. So, where does that leave Southwest Virginia?

It should be obvious that Southwest Virginia has a litter problem. The fact the Black Diamond RC&D is sponsoring this summit, and that no less than Virginia's Attorney General, Jerry Kilgore, is a principal speaker, suggests we have a problem. A number of hard working volunteer organizations and individuals, often

with the financial support and legal backing of local units of government, have worked at this seemingly endless task for many years. There have been some successes, but the problem with litter never seems to fully go away. Dealing with it continues to be frustrating and expensive for local government.

At its most basic level, economic development means convincing a private enterprise, whether it be a corporation or an entrepreneur who might be interested in establishing a cottage industry in our region, that this is a good place for that investment. This is particularly critical when a company's clients might visit a facility in the region. The presence of a large amount of litter along our major thoroughfares is not the image the company wants to portray to its clients. By locating here, whatever problems we had before they came would have then become their problems as well. So beyond the obvious financial, labor force and site issues we normally think about, businesses take a close look at the intangibles, and that includes litter control.

Another major component of our regional economic development effort is tourism. Consider one exciting new initiative, "The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail." How successful can we be in attracting visitors to the Ralph Stanley Museum in Clintwood, Appalachian Traditions in Josephine, or the Carter Fold in Maces Springs, if "The Crooked Road" is a linear garbage dump? Again, litter control is as fundamental to the success of this project as the public investments that have constructed or expanded these venues of our musical heritage.

If you ask any economic development professional in Southwest Virginia if litter was a negative issue in attracting private business investment, the answer would be a resounding “yes.” And yet, many of these things are beyond the control of the small cadre of economic development professionals who do not have that issue as one of their responsibilities. What can we do?

A number of viewpoints have been advanced on the best way to approach litter control in Southwest Virginia. This writer has always favored more rigorous enforcement, along with significant fines for those who would ignore the litter control laws that are already on the books. Certainly it’s difficult and unpopular to enforce, but with support of an understanding court and aggressive action on the part of the law enforcement community, it might be possible to make a difference. This would be particularly true if our population understood that their propensity to litter had a direct bearing on the chances of children and future generations having employment opportunities here. The success of using parolees to collect litter in Buchanan County should also be replicated in all our counties.

It’s time to make an example of the thoughtless few who have no sense of pride in themselves, or the region we love. Many people work hard each day to see southwest Virginia succeed, economically. If those who would litter don’t care, let’s catch them, drag them into court, and make them pay a hefty fine for their thoughtlessness. It’s not right that those who take pride in Southwest Virginia should be penalized by those who couldn’t care less.