

Cardinal News: Could tobacco commission be a model for other places? (6/13/22)

<https://cardinalnews.org/2022/06/13/could-tobacco-commission-be-a-model-for-other-places/>

"More recently, the tobacco commission has created a "talent attraction program" in which it pays off the student debt of recent college grads who agree to move to the tobacco commission footprint to take certain hard-to-fill jobs – typically in health care and certain technical occupations. The commission sees this as a two-fer: This helps fill those jobs; it also draws young adults to rural areas where populations have been declining and aging. State Sen. Chap Petersen, D-Fairfax, was so intrigued by this program that last fall he declared it was "the most innovative idea I've heard in 20 years." So far, that program has helped pay for 299 people. If there's any criticism, it's that that number seems pretty small compared to the problem it's trying to fix: We need something more like 29,900 new college grads in tobacco country, not 299. But you've got to start somewhere."

Cardinal News: How the tobacco commission is paying off student loans (10/19/21)

<https://cardinalnews.org/2021/10/19/how-the-tobacco-commission-is-paying-off-student-loans/>

Kelly, one of the first 92 to be granted a TAP award, took a job with Wise Primary School and moved home.

"I wasn't excited to go back home. But, knowing what I know now I'm really glad I made that decision," said Kelly, who bought a house, got married this summer and is now expecting her first child.

Whitney Peters had just graduated with her Doctorate in Physical Therapy and taken a job in Tennessee when she learned about TAP from her college.

"As you probably know student loan debt is real and so this is just an awesome way to help with that and I love that part of what they do with it is to require the 50 hours of community service," said Peters who was more than \$125,000 in debt after graduation.

Peters applied for TAP, was chosen, and took a job at Benchmark Physical Therapy in Abingdon, where she is now the Clinical Director.

Kimberley Archer learned about TAP when she got an email from her principal at Amelia Elementary School. She had just gotten her degree in education and was excited about changing from a career in sales to special education.

"I think it's a great opportunity to give back to your community to get there and help to build relationships with your students and their family members," Archer said. ... "In a small town, it's real close-knit. That's what I like about it. And you want to see your students, and your community excel as well."

(Video) WSLs: Danville native one of dozens awarded student loan repayment from Virginia Tobacco Commission (5/27/22)

<https://www.wsls.com/news/local/2022/05/27/danville-native-one-of-dozens-awarded-student-loan-repayment-from-virginia-tobacco-commission/>

(Video) WCYB: Loan repayment program helping college graduates and Southwest Virginia (3/25/22)

<https://wcyb.com/news/local/loan-repayment-program-helping-college-graduates-and->

[southwest-virginia-03-25-2022](#)

(Video) WSLs: Virginia Tobacco Commission offering \$1.5M in student loan repayment to live, work in Southwest Virginia (2/26/22)

<https://www.wsls.com/news/local/2022/02/26/virginia-tobacco-commission-offering-15m-in-student-loan-repayment-to-live-work-in-southwest-virginia/>

Roanoke Times: Editorial: Virginia will pay you to move to Southside or Southwest. (Some restrictions apply) (4/26/21)

See below .pdf - online the article is behind a paywall

"The 40 localities in Southwest and Southside Virginia covered by the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission have been doing the same thing since 2019, just in a different way and without the fanfare that accompanied West Virginia's offer. It's useful to look at how they're different and why the tobacco commission's program is probably superior."

What West Virginia is doing isn't unique. States have long provided financial incentives to certain companies to locate there; the only thing different now is that some localities are applying this technique to recruit individual workers. This is a direct (and creative) reaction to an economy that is draining the American heartland and concentrating economic growth in metropolises mostly along the coasts.

There's actually a pretty long list of places that are now, quite literally, willing to pay people to live there.

These are just some of the highlights: Vermont offers \$10,000 for remote workers.

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Tulsa, Oklahoma, now offers \$10,000 to certain remote workers or entrepreneurs plus a \$1,000 housing stipend.

In Newton, Iowa, the total package is \$13,000 if you buy a house.

Topeka, Kansas, offers up to \$15,000 for homebuyers, so West Virginia isn't even necessarily the best offer out there, just the one nearest to us.

Or is it?

The 40 localities in Southwest and Southside Virginia covered by the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission have been doing the same thing since 2019, just in a different way and without the fanfare that accompanied West Virginia's offer.

It's useful to look at how they're different and why the tobacco commission's program is probably superior.

West Virginia will pay \$12,000 to remote workers who can bring their job with them. If there's one thing we've learned from the Age of Zoom, it's that a lot more jobs can be done remotely than we once realized.

West Virginia also throws in free co-working space as part of the deal. For the full details, see ascendwv.com. Here's one important detail: Only three localities in West Virginia are part of this — Morgantown, Lewisburg and Shepherdstown. Those are all charming places. They're also communities that need the least help.

Morgantown and Shepherdstown are in counties that are doing something most West Virginia counties aren't — growing. Greenbrier County, home to Lewisburg, is losing population but not nearly so much as other counties.

In West Virginia terms, this program benefits some of the state's most well-off localities. It doesn't help the counties in the coalfields of southern West Virginia, some of which are hemorrhaging people at rates of -16% (Logan County and Mingo County), -17% (Boone County and Wyoming County) and even -26% (McDowell County) over the past decade.

By contrast, the tobacco commission program is aimed at exactly those types of counties in Virginia.

The tobacco commission program also targets a different set of workers than the ones West Virginia is going after.

Specifically, Virginia's tobacco commission is targeting seven specific occupations that the region desperately needs: 1. public school teachers in science, math, technology/computer science, or career and technical education. 2. Public school special ed teachers. 3. Speech language pathologists. 4. Physical therapist. 5. Occupational therapists. 6. Industrial or electrical engineers. 7. Information security, network or computer systems analysts.

If you've graduated since March 15, 2019, with a degree in one of those fields, you're eligible. The deal: Take a job in the tobacco commission footprint in Southside or Southwest and agree to live there for two years as well as "become significantly civically engaged in their community by volunteering with local nonprofit or government activities, such as the United Way, Ruritan Club, Junior League, PTA, citizen committee for local government, local fire/EMS, food banks, youth sports coach, etc., with a total annual engagement of at least 50 hours of work."

If you do that, the tobacco commission will help you pay off some of your student loans. The commission will pay up to \$12,000 toward student loans each year for two years, with a potential to re-up for another two years. That makes Virginia's program potentially more lucrative than what other places are doing — it might pay up to \$48,000 toward student loan debt.

So how's this working out? We don't know yet. Too soon to tell.

By the time the program got started, many of that year's graduates had already made plans and then the pandemic hit. But here's what we do know: The first year 120 people applied, 92 were accepted and 73 wound up fulfilling the requirements the first year so far — for which the commission paid out \$670,000 in loan repayments.

That cohort still has a year to go. Last year the commission had 91 people apply and 77 accepted; they're just now coming up on the end of their first year. If all fulfill the requirements that would be \$1.35 million. The deadline to apply for the third cohort is Friday; see www.revitalizeva.org/grant-loan-program/student-loan-repayment.

Here's what we do know: The first year, the single biggest group were special ed teachers (24%) followed by math teachers (14%) and science teachers (12%). The second year it was special ed teachers (23%), occupational therapists (19%) and science teachers (17%).

Geographically, these are spread across Southwest and Southside, with the biggest concentration in the sub-region that includes Bristol, Galax and the counties of Bland, Carroll, Floyd, Grayson, Smyth, Washington and Wythe.

The second biggest is the subregion that covers Danville, Martinsville and the counties of Franklin, Henry, Patrick and Pittsylvania.

Here's one advantage the tobacco commission approach has: It actively recruits occupations the region needs.

By targeting recent grads, that also helps bring in young adults — a demographic group that's in short supply in an aging region. And by making civic engagement a requirement, there's the hope that participants put down roots in the community and stay beyond their two-year commitment. If they get married and stay, all the better.

Remote workers are good to have — they bring in money without many infrastructure demands — but Evan Feinman, executive director of the tobacco commission, also points out a hazard of West Virginia's strategy of recruiting remote workers: "Someone who can pick up and show up in your community can also pick up and leave."

We'll know a lot more about how well this program works in about two years. If it does work, Virginia then has an interesting policy question before it: Should it put up more money to expand the program?

