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Page 1

Q1

Describe your overall philosophy toward the role of state government as it relates to business and industry.

So long as industries are not compromising the environment, health, labor, and safety standards established by the state, there should be little to no red-tape. The state should keep up with technology that can be used to reduce the burden of excessive paperwork on businesses.

Q2

What do you bring to the office you seek? Specifically, what have you built, improved, or changed for the benefit of your community or business?

I am currently self-employed, doing communications and public relations contract work. I understand the "gig" economy, and some of the challengers that face freelancers and contractors, which make up a significant portion of the economy. I've helped to improve

Q3

Please list any groups, associations, or non-profits in which you are an active member or volunteer such as civic groups, labor organizations, advocacy groups.

Common Sense Ballot Access Coalition (I authored SB 733 for 2020 session)
Mountain Party of West Virginia
West Virginia Can't Wait

Q4

West Virginia is facing many challenges. What do you consider to be the most important and critical challenge that threatens our state and what is your plan to alleviate this threat?

Not having the foresight to become the nation's leader in green manufacturing is a challenge and a threat, due to both the ecological and economic consequences. The cheap, clean, on-demand, 24/7, green energy source for the 21st century in West Virginia is Geothermal, and it can sustainably lead us into the 22nd century. This is an untapped energy source, with the potential to power significant portions of the eastern seaboard. This would not just be for residential electricity, but for large, industrial scale manufacturing and other sectors. Coal and even natural gas as we know it are the fuels of the past, and we need to accept this.

Q5

During the 2020 Legislative Session, SJR 9 and SB 837 moved in the West Virginia Senate, but fell short of the votes needed to move to the House of Delegates. The intent of the effort was to allow West Virginians to vote on a constitutional amendment to phase-out/repeal of manufacturing inventory, machinery, and equipment tax, business inventory, and tax on passenger vehicles while making local governments and schools whole. Please describe your ideas for addressing this issue which requires a change to the West Virginia Constitution.

I absolutely support reducing vehicle property tax, and would support abolishing it altogether so long as that tax revenue can be better sourced elsewhere OR cuts in spending are made. Our state needs to be cautious in making sure it does not go overboard in cutting various taxes on corporations. Unsustainably done without adjusting the state's spending will inevitably result in tax hikes on the backs of the working-class, which is wrong.

Q6

What ideas do you have to help build our state's economy and improve West Virginia's position in competing for investment and job growth?

One of the most desperate areas West Virginia is lacking on the investment front is Broadband infrastructure. COVID-19 has made this more apparent. High-speed internet is essential for business. I support the establishment of a citizen owned, community controlled broadband service for West Virginia. Cases of municipal broadband have shown how much faster and cheaper these services can be when the profiteering is eliminated. Not to mention, the current broadband companies like Frontier have failed to upgrade and expand its infrastructure because it is not profitable in rural Appalachia. We need a new approach!

Q7

Use of and addiction to opioids in West Virginia and our region have reached crisis levels. This is a problem being recognized not only at the state level, but at the federal level. What ideas do you have to help stop this devastating trend in our state?

We need to employ harm reduction strategies. It works and is cost effective. The model out of Portugal is a proven success. Drugs needs to be decriminalized, with addiction being treated as the health problem it is. In addition, cannabis ought to be legalized.

Q8

Racial justice and equity, LGBTQ rights and gender equity are important factors for many current West Virginia employers, companies that consider moving to our State, and employees who may consider relocating to West Virginia. How would you address these issues to recruit and retain companies and employees for whom this is a priority?

While there is only so much we can do to influence a corporation's culture, the best thing we can do is to pass the Fairness Act, as proposed by Fairness West Virginia. It's time to end employment and housing discrimination, which currently serves as a hurdle for LGBTQ+ employees to relocate to West Virginia. The top companies in the country generally maintain a philosophy of inclusion, diversity, and equality. This would be a wonderful incentive.

Q9

What are your specific ideas related to developing a diverse and skilled workforce in West Virginia?

We need to re-invest in education as we know it. The high school diploma of the 20th century held more value than its 21st century counterpart. Today HR departments review applications in some cases at only seconds at a time. Our state's workforce needs a resume boost, and we can do this by not stopping at the associate degree level. We should be offering bachelors and graduate degrees for in-state students through low-cost digital/virtual means. There's no reason why we can't have a state approved MBA program that is online and free for West Virginia residents. The technology and infrastructure is already there, and universities are already beginning to compete with MOOC platforms.

Q10

The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection proposed a rule for the 2021 Legislative Session to adopt a portion of US EPA recommended human health criteria which established limits for certain environmental permits. The WVMA is actively involved in ongoing discussions related to these criteria and supports the WV DEPs approach to establish an active work group to further evaluate these important measures. Please describe your position on the proposed rule.

I have not reviewed the proposed rules by WV DEP at this time. I am open to rule changes that do not make it easier to pollute. We have to move forward, and there are ways to go green that can be profitable.

Q11

Please describe policies that you believe may be helpful in balancing state regulations and environmental rules while maintaining a competitive atmosphere for industrial job growth and investment?

We need to change our thinking on this. We can't balance out or make a deal on climate change, or frankly any serious environmental issue. Let's develop clean, green solutions for industries to thrive. The state should offer guidance in how companies can find unique ways to go green while remaining profitable. For example, if the state made the investment to power West Virginia with geothermal, large companies wanting to market themselves as ethical and socially responsible, would absolutely want to set-up shop. In 2020 and beyond, what company would not want a zero-emissions manufacturing facility as part of their portfolio? We can help make this happen! Unfortunately, I may be one of the only candidates with this vision, and certainly so in the 59th.

Q12

What would you like to share with our members that we have not asked?

For a productive West Virginia, we must invest in our workforce. Many workers are employed with an hourly wage without benefits or through the gig economy as a contractor or freelancer.

Workers with poor dental, mental, and visual health are set-up for failure in the workplace. Working-class life expectancies are declining. We need to change this trend.

We need a state financed worker-care program to provide on-demand dental, mental, and vision care with community controlled, county elected health boards to administer. This program can serve as a stepping stone for the federal government to establish a National Health Service (NHS) to implement life-saving Medicare For All, to be community controlled and locally administered.

Take the burden of healthcare off the backs of employers, especially small businesses. It's time to cut-out the expensive, profiteering middle man: the insurance companies.

Q13

Would you be available for an interview remotely or in person?

Yes

Q14

Where may the WVMA follow you on Social Media? Please list social media handles including Facebook, Twitter, and others.

Facebook: @smithwvus

Twitter: @RobertEdSmith

Q15

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Q16

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Q17

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