

Angie Rosser: Floods show need for more public investment, not less (Charleston Gazette-Mail)

By Angie Rosser

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Like many of my Clay and Kanawha county neighbors, I watched the Elk River rise throughout the day June 23.

I was in denial that the river would ever reach into my home. Denial quickly transformed into resignation when I could see the muddy waters coming up through my floor vents. I frantically moved what I could to an upper level and secured the canoe to my back door as the plan of escape.

In the weeks since, even without running water or electricity, inches of mud were shoveled out, floors and walls removed, furniture sent to the dump, flood-water-filled ducts and insulation dragged out — thanks to some amazing friends and volunteers.

Through it all, I've found myself pulled between two poles of thoughts and emotions. One is the overwhelming sense of gratitude for all those people who helped or offered to help, who took time from their lives to help me with mine. The other is a sense of despair for something this flood signifies for West Virginia.

When I now go to work in Charleston, I am struck by a sense of entering another world. It's a world in which people's homes are not destroyed. Where, when the tap is opened, water flows. When a switch is flicked, a light comes on. And neighbors are not sleeping in tents.

When I go to Charleston, I wonder whether legislators bent on spending cuts see the connection between good government and people who are secure.

The floods came on the heels of a legislative session focused on slashing every government service. It has become a point of pride for some legislators to cut spending at all costs.

They have convinced themselves if they make government small enough and cheap enough, new businesses will flock to West Virginia.

The floods show me the opposite is true. It's an alternate universe as striking as the one between those living in tents uncertain what the future will hold and those enjoying a relaxed lunch with friends on Capitol Street.

One of the primary functions of government is to provide the infrastructure for society to flourish and the resources to assist citizens in times of disaster. Most people looking to start or relocate a business get this.

When businesses relocate, they look for schools that are funded for excellence. They look for outdoor recreation opportunities and quality of life. They look for roads that are safe and well maintained. They look for infrastructure that will be there for them when crisis comes.

That is because business owners are investors. They know: You invest to grow; you don't cut your way to greater revenue.

Recent Gazette-Mail articles by Andrew Brown and David Gutman illuminate the contradictory direction our state seems to be moving: How can cutting funding for our infrastructure, public health and public safety help build a place that is inviting to people and businesses?

When we invest in infrastructure, we are investing in people. When we invest in people, we are investing in communities. When we invest in communities, we are building a stronger environment for business to grow — bringing more opportunities for prosperity.

A government that touts itself as pro-business must consider more than cutting corporate taxes and eliminating regulations that safeguard our people. A government that calls itself pro-family must invest in schools and roads and water and Internet and the other building blocks of a whole and thriving community.

For West Virginia to realize its full potential, we need to build a place where people want to live. We need to do more than show how little money we can spend on services and infrastructure.

A friend commented that I am smiling in all of the post-flood photos. That is because I was surrounded by the collective spirit of all West Virginians. Many of them were young people, teenagers of modest means growing as good neighbors.

I want to live in a West Virginia that has a future for them. Where they have the job opportunities of tomorrow, not one in which jobs of yesterday become scarcer and scarcer — and where our vision becomes smaller each day.

Every business owner knows one can cut expenses only so deep. At some point, you must focus on new revenue and new economies. The path there begins with our elected officials embracing the role of government as an investment in the future.

None of our political leaders caused these floods. But all of them have a responsibility to imagine a future for West Virginia that is more than longing for the past.

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<http://www.wvgazette.com/gazette-op-ed-commentaries/20160727/angie-rosser-floods-show-need-for-more-public-investment-not-less-gazette#sthash.PLH9ih1g.dpuf>