

Remarks of Peter Hille, chair, East Kentucky Leadership Conference, awards dinner, Eastern Kentucky University, April 27, 2017

I love the fact that we have the East Kentucky Leadership Conference in April every year. It's such a beautiful time of year—and it's a time of transition as we transition from redbud winter to dogwood winter to blackberry winter, in and out of spring as we prepare to burst into summer. All these beautiful flowers—but the blossoms have to fall to make the fruit, and the fruit has to fall so the seeds can sprout, and summer has to turn to fall and then winter so we can start the cycle all over again. Transitions.

We see these transitions in the life of organizations as well. This is the 30th year for the East Kentucky Leadership Conference and we have continued to grow and change. We have several new board members, and they are bringing new ideas and new energy. Several of them will be leading breakout sessions tomorrow morning.

We are holding the conference in Richmond this year for the very first time. And next year we will be in Hindman, also for the first time. We've ramped up our use of social media, and in large part that has been made possible by some great students here at ECU under the guidance of Melissa Newman.

But some things stay the same, as they should. Ten years ago, our founding board chair Grady Stumbo, had this to say on the occasion of our 20th anniversary conference. Grady said:

The East Kentucky Leadership Foundation is about creating a vision for a vibrant and stimulating place called Eastern Kentucky. It [is] about each of us looking out not only for our own interest, but for the interest of others.

And what Grady said at our 20th conference is just as true today as we celebrate our 30th. We continue to carry that vision of a vibrant and

stimulating place called Eastern Kentucky. To live up to these words requires that we continually renew ourselves, that we embrace both tradition and transition.

It's easy to embrace tradition—traditions like family, culture and a deep appreciation for the beauty of this place. And, as Grady observed, the tradition of looking out for each other.

But embracing transition--that can be much harder. And make no mistake, we are in a time of great transition. Nowhere is this more evident than in the changes to our economy. The rapid decline of the coal industry in recent years has laid bare an inescapable truth: we relied too much, and for too long, on a single industry. We were not prepared for transition.

And the reality is that this region has been in deep economic distress for decades, so turning back the clock a few years won't take us where we need to go. The challenge we face is not to revive the old economy but rather to build a new economy.

To have a fair shot at building a new economy requires a level playing field. It's hard to build a new economy in a place where broken markets make it harder to start new businesses; where the natural environment has been compromised; where the infrastructure is sorely lacking; and where long-term economic distress has impacted health, education, demographics. The people of Eastern Kentucky deserve a level playing field.

This region literally fueled the growth of our nation and now we bear the brunt of the transition in our global energy economy. We owe a debt to these communities, to the workers, to their families. And part of how we pay that debt is by making the investments needed to level the playing field. That's what we mean when we talk about shaping a transition with

attention to what is fair, to what is just—and creating a Just Transition is going to take major investment.

Now here's the good news. Over the last few years, the federal government has begun a series of significant new investments aimed at supporting a Just Transition, through the POWER Initiative, the Abandoned Mined Lands Pilot Project, Promise Neighborhoods, the Promise Zone, and the RECLIAM Act that Congressman Rogers is working hard to push through Congress.

I also want to point out that there is one federal agency that sits at the center of all these new investments, the only federal agency that gives its full attention to our region—the Appalachian Regional Commission. It's not your normal federal agency. These folks know our area well, they know our roads, they know our towns, they know our people, our programs, our problems. They are real partners in this work.

It's been far too long since we invited the head of the ARC to speak at the East Kentucky Leadership Conference—in fact, I think the last time was in 1994—so we are very pleased to have Earl Gohl with us tonight.

Earl Gohl is the eleventh federal co-chair in the history of the ARC. He was nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate in March 2010. I believe Earl gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night thinking about Appalachia, and about how the ARC can help us move this region forward. And I know he believes in us—in fact, I've heard him say many times that Appalachia is the next great investment opportunity in America. He shares our vision of a bright future. We've been lucky to have him as an ally in Washington and we're very pleased to have him with us here tonight. Please join me in welcoming the Federal Co-Chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission, Earl Gohl.