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By Jeff Vanderbeck
Appalachian News-Express

An open letter to “60 Minutes” after their piece on “Billionaire on the Bus”:

I have been a lifelong viewer of “60 Minutes,” and have enjoyed most of the stories regardless of the slant. Andy Rooney was a gem.

When the national media does a story on this area it’s always negative. You didn’t disappoint. The fact that Pikeville has garnered national and worldwide attention lately because of its resources helps in our efforts to rebuild our economy. This piece could have been exceptional in telling how a region is rebuilding itself after major changes in policy and technology has torn it down, with little outside help. However, I’m hoping people looking to invest in this region will look past the fluff and explore the value of our offerings, which are many.

The notion that Appalachia equals poverty, drugs and instability is absurd. There are places all over the country where that is a fact of life. I would guess there are homeless drug addicts right there on West 57th Street. But, insulting mountain people apparently sells and fits your motive.

If you had done any research, you would have discovered a plethora of educated people who are talented, technologically-advanced and perhaps the most friendly in the nation.

I run a slew of successful newspapers in the region and frankly, if my reporters published a piece like that, they would be fired.

The lack of fact-checking was apparent to everyone who is from this area, but since it put Appalachian down, I guess your editors decided to let it slide. Rise of the Rest, the investment group that wants to help middle America has a great concept. The report referenced that they would be investing in AppHarvest, but never mentioned how much they would invest or their expectations. There was \$100,000 given to a music tech company in Memphis with measurable accountability, according to the report, but nothing like that reported about the AppHarvest deal.

AppHarvest also has a great concept. Developing produce in greenhouses in this area where the turnaround time gets cut significantly is a fantastic concept, an idea the leaders of this region were behind.

Your piece made AppHarvest look like John Wayne riding in to save the poor Appalachian folks. AppHarvest tied up property for four years and was forced to leave because not only did they not have funding, they didn’t have a plan.

And their attempt to hire recovering drug addicts to work cheap was absurd and the claim was unsubstantiated. There are drug problems everywhere. Again, if you had done any research, you would have found that this is one of the most workforce-ready regions in the country. That is

according to One East Kentucky that has statistics and research to prove that.

And while the camera showed the reporter and two others walking along the rolling hills of Eastern Kentucky, the report stated that AppHarvest was looking for their second location. It would have been responsible journalism if they showed or even mentioned where the first location was. There isn't one.

I was especially intrigued with the two students interviewed who stated that there are no jobs and that more people die from overdoses. I called the coroner and he said he was never contacted by anyone from CBS or "60 Minutes." In our newspapers there are usually ads showing available jobs in the region. I was at a meeting recently where Pikeville Medical Center showcased their available jobs. There are jobs in housekeeping, nurse assistants, phlebotomists and many others where you can start right out of high school and work your way up. Again no fact-checking. Ironically, one of their shots panned Caroline Avenue and if they had taken two more steps, they could have walked into our building and purchased a paper to see the job offerings.

The camera panned across Walmart stating they were the largest employer in Pikeville. Again, that's just shoddy journalism with lousy fact-checking. Pikeville Medical Center is the largest and growing. A quick check of their website shows their employees and available jobs.

There was no mention of the world-class healthcare Pikeville Medical Center offers. They have equipment and perform procedures that are not available in other parts of the state.

There was no mention of the 23rd optometry school in the country and one of only a handful of medical facilities that teach using virtual reality, no mention of the osteopathic medical school or the MBA program available at the University of Pikeville. There was no mention of the technical college, the available trained job market, the quality of life offered to the people of the region. There were just a few universally bad things highlighted, which can be found anywhere.

I extended an invitation to Steve Case, the "Billionaire on the Bus," as well as J.D.Vance the author of "Hillbilly Elegy," to a real visit of the region. If Mr. Case and his foundation want to rebuild middle America, he should have a proper introduction to the areas that can use his help.

They say that bad publicity is still publicity, I don't believe that. We are still recovering from "Mountain Dew mouth." So please, next time you decide to do a piece on this region, please do your homework and work with the people who know things about this region and are doing their best to further its economy.