

**Where owners live can make a difference**

By Ron Bartizek

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Proponents of the Wall Street West initiative, designed to boost financial services industry jobs in Northeastern Pennsylvania, say education and training for careers that require high-level technical and cognitive skills will be keys to their success. We can build buildings and broadband, but they won't come unless there's a sufficient labor pool to fill the seats.

They are not alone; there seems to be agreement that future growth and prosperity won't be found just in the alleys of humungous distribution centers or behind counters in chain retail stores. Until and unless we can prove our mettle at the computer and in the laboratory, quality employers with bright prospects will be reluctant to locate here.

That assumption is probably correct, and local colleges and universities should be congratulated for launching an unprecedented effort to coordinate and cooperate for the benefit of all students, not just their own. But, as this past week's announcement that J.C. Penney will shut down a call center in Moosic shows, we need to do more than simply train worker bees for faraway corporations, we need to inspire a new generation that can start and grow their own businesses with deep roots in the community.

That's a much more difficult assignment than teaching calculus or biology; in addition to the basics successful entrepreneurs need to be creative, ambitious and filled with a sense of possibility. Until now, those qualities have not been as common here as loyalty and a version of tolerance that far too readily accepts poor performance. If you don't believe that, explain why Luzerne County government is such a mess.

Those attitudes can take root after decades of decline and disappointment, when real opportunities are hard to come by, driving young people to look elsewhere for fulfillment. But Wall Street West, the proposed Commonwealth Medical College and burgeoning local Internet businesses offer a realistic chance to change the game. Perhaps the first step to prosperity is attracting bigger and better employers from outside, but there's a parallel track that may be even more important – nurturing a climate where homegrown business leaders and professionals can flourish.

All businesses face tough times now and then. How they respond to them can vary depending on management's stake in both the business and the place they call home. Seeing declining catalog orders, the executives at Texas-based Penney scanned their seven call centers and decided it was most convenient to shutter this one, putting 275

people out of work. The decision was made easier because Penney's top brass don't have to look in the eye the people they've laid off when they bump into them in the supermarket or at a Little League game.

You have to think that local owners, instead of looking for the easiest way out, would have tried harder to find a solution that preserved jobs rather than jettisoning them.