



Wheeling MSA Growing 5th Fastest in Nation

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By CASEY JUNKINS Staff Writer , The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

ST. CLAIRSVILLE More than a half-decade of drilling, fracking, pipelining, hotel building and other activities associated with the Marcellus and Utica shale boom are adding up, as new statistics show the area consisting of Belmont, Marshall and Ohio counties comprises the fifth-fastest growing economy in the nation.

The Wheeling Metropolitan Statistical Area's gross domestic product grew by 9.5 percent from 2013 to 2014, according to data provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce. Gross domestic product is generally defined as the monetary value of all the finished goods and services produced within a respective area's borders over a specific time period.

The government counts 381 MSAs throughout the nation. The only areas to outpace the local MSA for economic growth last year are those in Midland, Texas, San Angelo, Texas, Lake Charles, La., and Greeley, Colo.

Article Photos



Photo by Casey Junkins

Largely because of the housing demand created by oil and natural gas industry workers, new hotels and apartment complexes continue popping up in Belmont County — including a new 48-unit project at the site along National Road once home to The Grove Restaurant.

Natural gas and mining account for the vast majority of the economic growth for the MSA. In Marshall County alone over the past several years, tens of billions of dollars in new investment has come about, primarily in gas development and refinement, with more planned for the future.

There's also the planned \$5.7 billion ethane cracker at Dilles Bottom to consider.

All of the new money has led to an abundance of economic development projects, most of which is related to shale gas. These projects include:

- the new hotels opening near the Ohio Valley Mall or at The Highlands;
- the entirely new Kettler's Ridge retail development in St. Clairsville;
- the ongoing expansion of pipelines and processing infrastructure in Marshall County;
- new natural gas wells drilled virtually anywhere in the MSA;
- new vehicles or houses sold to those who collect money from the natural gas drillers;
- numerous other retail and service industry operations related to the shale boom.

Despite a current slowdown in drilling amid lower prices and lack of adequate pipeline capacity, the boom seems likely to continue - with or without PTT Global Chemical's ethane cracker, which would further alter the landscape of the Dilles Bottom area of Belmont County.

PTT Global officials recently agreed to spend \$100 million for design and engineering plans for the massive project, for which they should reach a final investment decision by the end of 2016. The huge petrochemical plant would create hundreds of permanent jobs upon completion, but would also require thousands of temporary contractors during its construction phase. This could compel the development of even more hotels and/or housing options in the Upper Ohio Valley, along with downstream chemical processors to service the facility.

Belmont County Commissioner Mark Thomas sees nothing but positive economic impacts from all that's going on in his county.

"They requested to know the number of available hotel rooms within a 60-mile radius of the site. There will need to be more housing - whether that includes hotels remains to be seen," Thomas said of those organizing the ethane cracker deal.

However, even without the final petrochemical plant commitment, Thomas said plans are in the works to build three more hotels in the vicinity of the Ohio Valley Mall and Plaza, in addition to those already under construction.

This summer, the 100-room Candlewood Suites property opened on the site once home to the Rax restaurant outside the Ohio Valley Mall. Now, a Residence Inn by Marriott, featuring 103 suites, is slated to open in a previously undeveloped area between Kmart and Interstate 70 next year.

The other hotel project underway near the mall is the Hawthorn Suites property, which will occupy the same hillside as the Hampton Inn and the Microtel by Wyndham.

"I know of three other hotels that are probably going to be built in or near the Ohio Valley Mall and Ohio Valley Plaza. They will get off the ground in the spring of next year," Thomas said, emphasizing these properties will be in addition to those currently under construction. He said these new facilities could add as many as 300 additional hotel rooms to the St. Clairsville area.

"The trickle-down effect of people going out to shop is huge in terms of creating new development and tax revenue is huge," Thomas said of the hotels.

However, permanent housing that may or may not be related to the ethane cracker development is also on the way, according to Thomas. He cited the new 48-unit project at the site along National Road once home to "The Grove" restaurant.

"There is now work on a new subdivision south of the Belmont Hills Country Club," Thomas said. "We are going to need housing for short-term construction workers. But we are also going to see more permanent housing for people who may move into the area for long-term careers."

The Wheeling MSA's economic future also will be a topic of discussion next month during the 2015 Wheeling area Economic Outlook set for 7:30 a.m. until noon Oct. 7 at Oglebay Resort and Conference Center. John Deskins, head of West Virginia University's Bureau of Business and Economic Research, will address the MSA's growth

during the session.

As for the region's other MSAs, their GDP growth was as follows, according to the Commerce Department:

- Charleston 6.4 percent growth, 11th in the nation
- Morgantown 4.9 percent growth, 28th in the nation
- Pittsburgh 2.9 percent growth, 77th in the nation.
- Parkersburg-Vienna 1.1 percent growth, 197th in the nation
- Weirton-Steubenville 0.7 percent growth, 229th in the nation

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