

OP-ED

Turning the corner in West Virginia

By **DAN CONANT**

HARD WORK and resilience are woven into the fabric of West Virginia. It's in our blood. Our muscle and our mountains powered our nation through an industrial revolution, two world wars and an information revolution.

Now, the world is changing around us. Our state lost 6,000 coal jobs in March and April of 2020. Despite gains in recent months, West Virginia is still 30,000 jobs short of where we were before the coronavirus pandemic. There simply aren't enough good jobs — jobs that are dependable, that pay benefits, that help sock away some at the end of the month — to support all the families that have lived here for generations.

Like so many young West Virginians, I left after high school. Career opportunities were elsewhere. I got into solar



SHOLTEN SINGER | The Herald-Dispatch file photo

Solar Holler founder Dan Conant crouches on the roof of Harmony House as a project is installed in 2018 in Huntington.

energy, worked my way up in the industry and saw the enormous economic opportunity it created.

Then I came home and started Solar Holler. West Virginia needs growth industries, and solar is

growing. Whether it's homeowners sick of paying more every year to the utility companies, schools looking for room in the budget to hire another teacher or large corporations that are meeting their clean energy

pledges, the world wants solar energy.

Good work means good jobs. All of our installers are union electricians — with strong pay and full benefits. Right now, Solar Holler is hiring its 62nd employee. We've doubled in size in the past year, but we see so much room to go bigger, faster. Like any industry, we need some help getting out of the starting blocks.

Right now, Congress is debating a massive infrastructure and energy proposal that could create thousands of solar, wind, hydro and energy-efficiency jobs in our state, and even more across the country. In the next 10 years, the clean energy sector is poised to grow from nearly half-a-million Americans to almost 2 million. We need to make sure our state isn't left behind, that we get the opportunities we deserve and that our kids can find good work here at home.

One way we can create more solar jobs in West Virginia is by leveling the playing field. Right

now, the biggest solar incentive is a 26% federal tax credit. That credit works only if you pay enough in taxes — which isn't a given if you're middle class. So, all those solar farms we see going up across rural America? Their tax credits go to huge companies, like Google and Goldman Sachs.

Making the solar tax credit refundable in the infrastructure package would mean normal folks can not just install the next generation of power plants — we can own them, too. Teachers, young parents, retirees — everyone — could have their piece of the 21st-century electricity grid.

West Virginia's leaders, from Charleston to Washington, can't miss out on this once-in-a-generation chance to catalyze a new industry across our state.

Dan Conant is the founder and CEO of Solar Holler, a West Virginia-based solar energy business.