Promoting opportunity in every corner of Kentucky

BY STATE REP. AARON THOMPSON

One of the Kentucky General Assembly's most important responsibilities is making sure state policies foster a strong business climate that encourages investment, supports job creation, and expands economic opportunity in every corner of the Commonwealth.

Since Republicans gained control of the General Assembly in 2016, Kentucky has seen record job growth fueled by common-sense policies: lowering the individual income tax to 3.5 percent, cutting red tape, investing in infrastructure, and responsible management of the state's $15-plus billion budget. High-growth areas, particularly between interstates 65 and 75, have attracted substantial new investment from both existing industries and companies locating here for the first time. We have made real progress, but we must keep our foot on the gas.

Much of rural and eastern Kentucky still needs additional tools so every Kentuckian has a realistic shot at earning a good living, no matter where they call home.

The district I represent has undergone profound change over the past 30 years. We lost a Fortune 500 headquarters when Ashland Oil relocated, watched the former CSX Russell rail yard shrink as the coal industry collapsed, saw a community hospital close, and witnessed the end of nearly a century of steel production at Ashland Works. These losses reshaped our economy, just as they did across Eastern Kentucky and other regions. Many families have left in search of the very opportunity their grandparents and great-grandparents once traveled here to find.

Despite these challenges, we continue to move forward. Eastern Kentucky remains a great place to live, work, and raise a family—yet we still need more good-paying jobs in the region, as do other parts of rural Kentucky.

That is why I was proud to support House Bill 869 this session, legislation led by Rep. Adam Bowling and Sen. Phillip Wheeler. The bill modernizes Kentucky's flagship Kentucky Business Investment program. KBI was formed to provide incentives for new and expanding companies in areas such as manufacturing, agribusiness, and headquarters operations. As our income tax rate dropped, the old KBI incentive structure lost competitiveness. HB 869 restores that edge by making every county eligible for enhanced credits—with extra resources targeted to communities that have suffered population loss and high unemployment. This is a win for urban, suburban, and rural Kentucky alike.

There is an old saying that "it starts at home." For economic development, state government cannot do this work alone.

Local county and city leaders must ensure their communities have the right tools in place to be seriously considered. This includes aggressive recruitment efforts, proactive economic development authorities, shovel-ready sites, and pro-growth local policies that make it straightforward for private-sector investment.

We have a great opportunity ahead of us: when any company looks at Kentucky for its next economic development project, every community should get a serious look.

Rep. Aaron Thompson represents Kentucky's 98th House district, which includes Greenup County as well as part of Boyd County.

What we lose by cutting FCPS family and community engagement efforts

BY VIRGINIA DOWNING

It's no secret that the Fayette County Public Schools system has been facing a challenging financial crisis. In response, at the end of the last academic year, school leaders made the painful decision to eliminate a number of district-wide positions, including those that make up a large component of The District's Family & Community Engagement Office.

As we move into a new school year, it is important to understand what this will mean for a unit with a primary goal of supporting the learning and development of youth, families and communities. Ultimately, the loss of district-level FACE liaisons will create resource and opportunity inequities that could affect all youth and families across our schools. Without them, it will be more important than ever to hold our school leaders accountable and uplift innovative ideas that cultivate strong school communities across the district.

Whether youth, families and community partners know their direct titles or not, the FACE liaisons are the faces of the school district outside of the classroom. Often, these roles are filled by community experts who hold deep relationships with community leaders, families, and young people beyond school walls. They organize and appear at events around the community, such as community dialogues about school safety, back-to-school rallies that include backpack giveaways, and free or reduced-price haircuts so children can feel confident going back to school.

Family and community engagement staff are also experts in school environments. They know how to work with educators to facilitate stronger relationships with families, as well as help families navigate school policies and common practices. Family and community engagement staff are often in the know about national research and policies that can support the district and provide professional development for educators, keeping school leaders up to date on current trends and research.

In my own research, I explore the important role of family and community engagement staff as bridges between communities and schools. These roles have been cited to increase families' confidence and knowledge in engaging with schools and leverage community assets to address educational issues such as chronic absenteeism.

So how will the Fayette County Public Schools prepare to recover what they are losing? Currently, the answers are unclear.

That's why community

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Solar panels are photographed at LG&E and KU's Renewable Integration Research Facility at the E.W. Brown Generating Station in Mercer County, Ky.

Proposed solar zoning in Lexington: A question of balance

BY HENRY JACKSON

As a long-time supporter of both the county's agricultural land preservation program and the Fayette Alliance, I urge approval of the proposed Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government's zoning change to permit development of up to 1% of county land for use as larger-scale solar energy systems.

Based on extensive study and discussions, the proposed zoning is a carefully crafted ordinance to facilitate the siting, development, construction, and decommissioning of such solar systems in a prescribed manner that promotes the safety, health and welfare of the community.

The proposed eight-page ordinance stipulates that larger ground-mounted solar systems must incorporate "agrivoltaics," a combination of solar power collection and required agricultural use such as sheep grazing, found to improve soil quality after a few years of grazing as well as a dependable source of farm income.

The proposed zoning is a comprehensive set of regulations stipulating rules for different sizes of solar arrays addressing solar panel locations, lot coverages, height limits, and a range of related development controls up to and including "decommissioning" of such facilities. There's also language that requires an expert-approved land/soil conservation plan and implementation schedule.

Likewise, intermediate size and large-scale solar development will require a conditional use permit, a public hearing process to present a proposed plan of development and its compliance with all applicable regulations.

As a particular advantage, the proposed zoning would yield significantly greater local control over otherwise exempt public utility site development and decommissioning, returning such sites to suitable agriculture use. This is a huge advantage over publicly-owned utilities that are only subject to State Public Service Commission regulations and thus exempt from local land use rules.

Above and beyond these proposed rules to assure the most compatible solar development possible, the proposed zoning is an affirmative implementation of both the Imagine Lexington city comprehensive plan and Empower Lexington sustainability plan. This proposal enables viable

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The fault is not in the stars: KSU must choose its future

BY MICHAEL FRAZIER

On a particularly hot, grueling day in 2006, my sophomore English class gathered in a classroom in Powell County, Kentucky. My superb English teacher put me in a cold sweat when she called on me to read "Julius Caesar" aloud.

I was exhausted after spending much of the previous night beside my mother while she was passed out, making sure she had not taken too many pills and would not overdose. With my mom asleep by my side, I completed my homework and read out loud Shakespeare while she slept.

During class, I encountered words I have never forgotten: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." My teachers, while ensuring I had the basic necessities, helped lift me from abuse and instability by demanding more from me than my circumstances did.

Years later, Shakespeare's lesson remains relevant. History can explain present circumstances, but eventually individuals and institutions must take responsibility for the choices within their control. Essentially, the fault lies no longer in your stars, dear Kentucky State.

Kentucky should apply this principle to Kentucky State University. Kentucky State University has a documented history of underfunding as Kentucky's only public HBCU, especially due to the weights that previously removed funding from KSU to the research universities in Kentucky's performance funding model.

The conditions facing KSU today, however, are substantially different. Kentucky has responded with significant appropriations, emergency assistance and structural intervention intended to stabilize the university. Historical inequities help explain how KSU reached this point, but they cannot provide an indefinite justification for financial instability or continued taxpayer bailouts.

In any case, KSU's current relationship with Kentucky taxpayers must be redefined with greater accountability. President Dr. Koffi Akakpo has nobly and honorably confronted the financial and institutional problems that made KSU's previous trajectory unsustainable, problems mostly made by current faculty, previous administrators, students not paying their debt, and complacency by alumni. The General Assembly responded with substantial funding, governance reforms and repeated intervention designed to preserve the university.

CPE figures show approximately $35 million in regular General Fund appropriations for KSU in fiscal year 2025-26, while state support per full-time-equivalent student substantially exceeds the amount provided to the University of Kentucky.

In 2022, lawmakers provided KSU a $23 million interest-free emergency loan to address accumulated deficits and structural financial problems, which CPE later

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