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8TH ANNUAL GALA CELEBRATES THE PAST, WHILE FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE

Local governments are going to need to step up their broadband game to deal with an increasingly virtual future, the nation's plummeting birthrate will affect everything and the new infrastructure bill is going to change how communities fund transportation projects.

Those were just a few of the revelations from an expert panel of futurists who appeared during the 2021 Lehigh Valley Gala + Awards, the LVPC annual event that aired December 9 on Vimeo.

The 60-minute event also included appearances by community leaders, an LVPC and LVTS 60th year anniversary celebration video and a tribute to former longtime LVPC Executive Director Mike Kaiser, who died in August.

The Gala culminated with the awarding of the FutureLV Heroes Award to the Youth Ambassadors in the CREATE Resilience program at Nurture Nature Center in Easton.

The full Gala + Awards video is now streaming at lvpc.org/lv-awards.

Since 2014, the LVPC has been holding an annual Gala to celebrate excellence in planning and collaboration at an event attended by as many as 300 people, but the COVID-19 Pandemic prompted the LVPC to move the event to a virtual platform for the second consecutive year.

“This 8th Gala is particularly special to us because it gives a chance to mark our 60th anniversary and celebrate six decades of promoting the health, safety and welfare of the Lehigh Valley and its now 687,000 residents,” LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley said in opening the event. “Over the next hour, we hope to inform you, make you smile and maybe even inspire you.”

New to the event was the expert panel that included renowned Lehigh University futurist Dr. Andrew Ward, local government expert David Sanko, executive director of the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors, and transportation funding expert Erich Zimmermann, who directs transportation programs at the National Association of Regional Councils. The panel was moderated by Greg Capogna, executive director of Bethlehem-based National Public Radio affiliate, WDIY FM 88.1. The intense 30-minute discussion was packed with details of what the future might hold, with each panelist coming at it from very different perspectives.

Ward noted that projections that being stuck at home during the Pandemic would spur a new baby boom have been dead wrong. Instead, suddenly more cautious potential parents have accelerated an already plummeting birthrate. As a result, the typical woman now has 1.6 children over the course of her lifetime, Ward said – less than half of what it was 50-years ago.

“The birth rate is lower now than during the second World War or any time in U.S. history,” Ward said. “That changes everything from healthcare to education to construction to financial services. Almost anything you can think of changes.”

Sanko said that while some communities were able to accommodate social distancing and virtual public access, others with low budgets struggled. And he noted that even the wealthy aren’t ready for what’s coming.

“The Pandemic has defined a new haves and have-nots in PA,” Sanko said. “To be able to communicate electronically, you’ve got to have broadband internet. I would say there’s not a single place in PA that has what they’re going to need 5 or 10 years from now.”

But the largest portion of the discussion focused on the recently passed \$1.2 trillion Federal Infrastructure Law. Zimmermann said motivated communities will be able to fund projects that can transform their transportation networks.

“Communities responding to Covid-19 have a real opportunity to be highly creative and think about ways to transform their communities because that’s what this [Federal Infrastructure) funding is going to support,” Zimmermann said, noting that the money won’t merely go to ‘shovel-ready’ projects that can be done quickly, but instead ‘shovel-worthy’ projects that will have the greatest long-term impact.

However, he also said much of the money will be distributed through dozens of new competitive grant programs – potentially widening the gap between the wealthy communities with the means and staff to apply and those that don’t.

Sanko noted that the impact of the money will be blunted by three decades of neglecting our roads, bridges and trails.

“It’s a lot of money, but we’ve grossly underfunded for years,” Sanko said. “The leaders in Washington and state capitols across the country have kicked the can down the road. The can has been kicked down the road so far, it’s disappeared into a sinkhole.”

The event also featured appearances by Lehigh County Executive Phillips Armstrong, Northampton County Commissioner Peg Ferraro, LVPC Chair Greg Zebrowski and LVTS Chair Chris Kufro, and a tribute to Kaiser. Kaiser worked for the LVPC for 50 years, including serving as Executive Director from 1968 to 2013.

“This region lost a legend in August when Michael Kaiser passed,” Bradley said. “Mike was at the LVPC for 50 years, including 46 years as Executive Director. During that time, he set a vision for everything from the expansion of the road system to where farmland should be preserved to the hundreds of miles of trails that we enjoy today. I am honored to have had the opportunity to work with one of the Lehigh Valley’s most defining figures of the second half of the last century.”

No current LVPC Commissioner worked with Kaiser longer than Percy Dougherty.

“Mike’s legacy is manifold because he touched everything in the Lehigh Valley,” Dougherty said. “He was a fighter and he stood up for the Lehigh Valley. He loved his Lehigh Valley.”

The height of the evening was the awarding of the FutureLV Heroes Award to 24 Easton, Wilson and Bangor area students who have spent the past two years raising awareness to climate change. Their work has included community education events, discussion forums, expert presentations, educational videos, arts-based activities, community resiliency tours, and hands-on household preparedness events designed to raise awareness and create community vision of resilience to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Now in their second year, these Youth Ambassadors are creating a community guidebook and murals representing each community’s vision.

“We’re not only proud of these students, but they give us reason for hope. They are showing us how to reduce the effects of the climate crisis and showing leadership during a defining moment in our nation and world history,” Zebrowski said. “I’m honored to present the Second Annual FutureLV Heroes Award to the Youth Ambassadors in the CREATE Resilience Program.”

Bradley closed the evening with a look to the more immediate future.

“In the coming year, we’ll be especially focused on community building, as we complete four multi-municipal comprehensive plans involving 31 communities, and work on a mega-regional freight plan that will address the increased freight across much of Eastern Pennsylvania,” she said. “And perhaps most important, we’ll be working with all of our municipal partners to advocate for impactful changes to our Land Use laws and give them new tools that will help them take a greater control of the flow of development arriving at their doorsteps every day. Most of all, we’ll continue to be a resource for

anyone who has a role in maintaining the Lehigh Valley as one of the nation's best places to live."