

# Two Kentucky Towns Envision a Future Beyond Coal

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**Shawn Poynter**

Artists have decorated an unused school building in Lynch, Kentucky.

In the history of Appalachian coal mining, Harlan County, Kentucky, is a landmark in the grassroots fight for better living and working conditions. Labor unrest in the 1930s earned the county the nickname “Bloody Harlan.” Intense organizing continues today, as Harlan County resident leaders help their communities transition from a coal economy into one based on renewable energy and energy efficiency.

Poor communities in Appalachia face a complex range of historical challenges. There are few employment alternatives to coal-related jobs, even though Kentucky’s coal industry employs a third of the workers that it did 30 years ago, largely due to the increased mechanization of the industry and the use of more “efficient”—and devastating—forms of mining such as mountaintop removal. Largely absentee landlords who control much of the coal reserves are an impediment to new forms of economic development. The local elite maintains tight control over politics, commerce, and public life in this region. And now, coal reserves in the Appalachian region are declining—and the public is becoming aware of the deleterious role of coal in climate change and environmental devastation.

The residents of two Harlan County towns are working hard to create a green future beyond coal. Created as “company towns,” Benham (population roughly 500) was founded by International Harvester, and Lynch, a historically African-American community of 800, was created by U.S. Steel. They sit at the foot of Black Mountain, Kentucky’s highest peak and its greatest potential site for wind power. Both towns have residents active in the local chapter of Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC), which serves as a hub for community organizing and building local support for alternative energy development and energy-efficient consumer behavior.

In Benham, a coalition made up of KFTC and the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) is exploring a range of renewable energy sources. In addition to wind power, potential exists for micro-hydro power, which would utilize the creeks that run through the towns, and small-scale solar energy. The coalition’s efforts are informed by the experiences and insights of local residents, but also by two reports from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: one on models for developing locally owned wind power and a second on viable strategies for local renewable energy and energy efficiency improvements.

As the mines “write people off” with job eliminations that trigger growing desperation and anxiety, Harlan County KFTC leader Carl Shoupe, a retired, disabled third-generation miner, realizes that this moment is a critical time to take action. Another KFTC member, Roy Silver, recognizes that he and other coalition leaders must understand the “fear tactics” used by mining companies. This intimidation has served to inhibit participation in community development. As a result, Silver’s and Shoupe’s community organizing style is highly personal and requires trusting contact with neighbors, friends, and families who represent a critical mass of people living in the area. As Silver sees it, the success of their efforts depends on getting more local residents involved in the policy process. Attendance at public discussions of these issues has grown and has resulted in the collection of more than 60 energy efficiency pledges by residents.

Many new partners have begun to participate in this county-wide greening effort. For example, the Benham Garden Club, a group of women who, for 16 years, has pursued community development, historic preservation, and political leadership in Benham, recently used its Energy Star *Change the World* grant to distribute compact fluorescent light bulbs. The Benham United Methodist Church has also distributed energy-efficient light bulbs and has hosted discussions of energy efficiency and energy audits.

Residents act as “watchdogs” to keep an eye on the Benham Power Board, says Silver. The community’s monitoring of the municipal utility has unearthed problems of accountability and transparency in energy rate-setting and policy. It found, for example, that while the city had not paid its electric bill in years, the Power Board had raised energy rates for single-family household users.

In neighboring Lynch, the mayor and city council, with the support of city residents, have become active in efforts to protect the community’s high-quality water source from destruction by several proposed coal mines. The headwaters of the Cumberland River not only supply Lynch and Benham, but would also provide water for a proposed water-bottling facility and create much-needed new jobs.



*Shawn Poynter*

A church in Lynch, Kentucky.

Lynch resident and KFTC member Rutland Melton is leading the development of renewable energy sources, and other local leaders are exploring the possibilities of tying green initiatives to local economic development through relationship building.

If residents' efforts to move their community beyond coal continue, we envision a very different society in Benham and Lynch in 2050. These communities will still be challenged, as all rural communities are, to maintain economic vitality. But Benham and Lynch will have achieved the diverse economy and vibrant local culture their leaders envisioned when they spoke of transition in 2010. Coal will have been phased out through a deliberate and gradual 25-year process during which miners continued to work underground, but with increased safety conditions. A plan to begin the region's transition beyond coal will have become a top priority. The land, streams, and forests once ravaged by coal mining will have been restored.

Coal subsidies, which had siphoned public resources away from education, infrastructure, and other public investments, will be a thing of the past. Schools will be adequately funded and much improved, so that local kids have the same opportunities afforded other children in Kentucky and beyond. Jobs will be provided, not by a single industry but by a range of locally based green industries, including small-scale wind and micro-hydro projects, wood products, tourism, and agriculture. Because the community worked to protect its water source, a small water-bottling plant will provide several jobs.

A thriving farmers' market and active herb co-op will supply fresh food to local tables and provide revenue for the area's farmers. The municipal utility, obtaining its power from a variety of clean sources, will export energy to the grid. All of the historic buildings will

have been restored and, in the process, made energy efficient. Many will use solar energy. In addition to the Benham Schoolhouse Inn, the community will have at least half a dozen other bed-and-breakfasts to house the many tourists who visit the area. Restaurants will serve food grown by local farmers. Visitors to the area will learn about its coal-mining history at attractions such as the Portal 31 Exhibition Coal Mine, but they will also learn about the community's commitment to energy efficiency and the story of its transition. The coal-camp houses will remain, but they will have been retooled for energy efficiency, spurring the local economy and creating new jobs.

Carl Shoupe even envisions a place where visitors ride a tram to the top of beautiful Black Mountain and enjoy the vista by hiking, riding horses, or hopping a rail car that follows the track once used by coal miners. There will be rich symbolism in taking the artifacts of an environmentally destructive practice and turning them into symbols of our new values. This community will have become an anchor for the future beyond coal. In fact, natives who left this area to find a better life elsewhere will have returned home to seize the opportunities here.

For Shoupe, the vision is clear: "Man, it could just be such a wonderful place."

