

Written Testimony before PA House Sub-committee –  
guest of Doyle Heffley

Emerging and Re-emerging Industries and Opportunities  
for Job Creation in Carbon County

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Degrees in Commercial Recreation, Physical Education,  
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In 1979, I was the organizer of a large group of college  
students at Farmingdale State University. We called  
Pocono Whitewater (then in their third year of operation)  
and booked with them. The trip was awesome, and I  
couldn't believe something as beautiful as the Lehigh River  
Gorge was two hours west of Manhattan.

After the first successful trip, I organized the group for one  
more year, then started coming on my own with about 10  
friends. At the time I was a private investigator in New  
York City, working with my father in the family business.  
I took a kayak class in 1982, and started river guiding for  
Pocono Whitewater in 1983 on weekends. River guiding  
kept me sane, bringing me back to the Outdoors every  
weekend here in Carbon County.

In 1986 Doug and Paul asked me to be the Guides and  
Operations Manager, where I worked for 4 seasons, then I

went back to school, then back to New York City, then back again to Jim Thorpe, working for Pocono Whitewater in the marketing area.

I started my Northeast PA Kayak School in 1999, and took it full time in June of 2000. It was gratifying to be running a small business, even a very small business, in this area. I specialized in beginner to advanced kayak instruction and we built a very good name for ourselves.

In 2007 I was injured and it looked like I would be permanently disabled and out of the kayak instruction business. It was that summer that I was approached by the owners of Jim Thorpe River Adventures, with whom I was lightly acquainted. They requested that I put a deal together to buy their rafting company. It was something I could do if I was disabled, so I said yes. Surgery was successful and my physical health was back, so I started Jim Thorpe River Sports, Inc. and we do business as Jim Thorpe River Adventures running raft and kayak trips along the Lehigh River.

So my experience is a full circle – I came here as a tourist, found an amazing place, came back, starting working here, bought a home here, and now have two successful businesses. I have a small team of great people we employ year-round, and we employ over 100 people in-season as administrative staff, truck/inflation crew, bus drivers, and river guides. It gives me great pleasure to be a businessperson in this area, and I feel a big responsibility to

feed and nurture our businesses and make them a great place to work, and a respected place to come and play.

To a large degree we promote our businesses ourselves, just like Blue Mountain Ski Area, Pocono Whitewater, Whitewater Challengers, Whitewater Rafting Adventures, Big Boulder/Jack Frost ski areas, and other bigger attractions. In summary, a few relatively larger attractions draw hundreds of thousands to Carbon County. These tourists brought in by our businesses not only participate in our specific activities, but fill restaurants, buy fuel, and stay at our full array of great accommodations. I think I speak for everyone when I say that we do our best to provide our guests with information about great hotels, good places to eat, and other places to visit during their stay.

I feel that a State sponsored or dollar-matched advertising program would really be helpful to the big attractions in the promoting the area. If we look at the per-head cost of each of our activities, the people coming to Carbon County spend far more than that during their stay. We should develop a cohesive tourism-marketing approach to combat the just-resurrected “I Love New York” campaign as well as similar efforts of our neighboring states.

The power of Carbon County outdoor experience is obvious. So many people come here and stay here because of the outdoors. This unique outdoor environment is the perfect antidote for Nature Deficit Disorder, and for getting people back to an appreciation of the outdoors. Above all, the Carbon County Outdoor Experience is a relatively

cheap vacation in tough economic times. Jim Thorpe and Carbon County have historically done well in tough times whether it was a bad economy or high fuel prices – people come here because they know the value of the experience. In 2009, when asked by County Treasurer Ronald J. Sheehan “how do you think we’ll survive this serious recession?” I responded by saying I felt we’d be alright, because “Jim Thorpe and Carbon County are the last places people won’t go”. Tourism has driven this economy for years, and has provided a living for many inter-related businesses.

So building a co-op arrangement to help attractions big and small would go a long way toward filling the tourism quota of all of the businesses in our beautiful Carbon County. This is my strong suggestion for legislators as many of us work to build the future of Carbon County.