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Even as the political landscape shifts in the U.S., the number of Inflation Reduction Act–funded projects is growing in western Pennsylvania, and grants from \$10 million that The Heinz Endowments set aside to boost local IRA efforts are helping to get the work started or to move it faster through the pipeline.

By Adam Reger

THE INFLATION REDUCTION ACT WAS BIG NEWS WHEN IT WAS SIGNED INTO LAW IN AUGUST 2022.



President Joe Biden, center, signs the Inflation Reduction Act at the White House in August 2022. Standing beside him are Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, (D-N.Y.), left, and U.S. Rep. James Clyburn, (D-S.C.).

The legislation committed roughly \$500 billion in investments and tax breaks toward job creation, energy savings programs and clean-energy initiatives.


More than two years later, the IRA is no longer on the “front page” of print or digital news sources for most Americans—and following the results of the 2024 presidential election, it faces an uncertain political future. While there are unanswered questions about President-elect Donald Trump’s plans for the funding package, he has signaled an intention to cut government spending, which may include the IRA.

This uncertainty has stakeholders across southwestern Pennsylvania working to prepare for several potential outcomes. Amanda Woodrum, co-director of ReImagine Appalachia, a nonprofit dedicated to building a clean-energy future in Appalachia, says that her organization’s January 2025 strategy summit will focus on ways to keep IRA funding in place, including highlighting the legislation’s success stories.

Despite the shadow hanging over the IRA, the package has already disbursed a considerable amount of money, the impact of which is only now beginning to be felt in communities across southwestern Pennsylvania.

“A lot of what we’re doing is just starting,” said Brian Regli, executive director of Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro’s Office of Critical Investments. Many of the initiatives funded under the IRA, Dr. Regli noted, are seven- to 10-year projects.

For those projects that have received funding, “2025 is really the implementation year,” said Sarah Ralich, senior



manager of energy and construction for ACTION Housing, a Pittsburgh nonprofit organization that helps homeowners and renters.

As IRA money begins to trickle down to the communities that will use it, this moment marks an exciting window of possibility, according to several nonprofit leaders (even if it is tinged with doubt about the legislation's future). The Heinz Endowments has played a vital supporting role, setting aside \$10 million to be available for grants to help fund everything from advancing solar power and retraining former mineworkers to preparing Appalachian communities for a clean-energy future.

As Matthew Barron, the Endowments' program director for Sustainability, put it, "We're thinking about this \$10 million investment as a sprint that helps us get moving faster and build some infrastructure, which gets us into a marathon where we're continuing to work on these things for the next decade plus."

If the innovations and initiatives supported by the Endowments prove successful, said Rob Stephany, the foundation's Community & Economic Development senior program director, it will be hard to return to old ways of doing things.

"If a school district can save money through solar energy and dedicate more funding to teachers and kids, that's a really hard thing to put back in a box," he said. "If we can build a clean-tech cluster that's employing union folks, that's a really hard thing to put back in a box."

But many of the nonprofits and municipalities now benefiting from the IRA's transformative investment faced critical gaps in their capacity to seize on these opportunities.

Also, in the first year of the legislation's implementation, western Pennsylvania did not benefit meaningfully from its incentives and grants.

For example, Climate Power, an environment-focused, strategic communications organization based in Washington, D.C., issued a Clean Energy Boom Anniversary Report in 2023 that found the IRA created the most permanent clean-energy jobs in Georgia (16,678), Michigan (15,856), New York (13,555) and South Carolina (13,543). Pennsylvania ended the first year with just 457 new jobs through the law.

The employment picture in Pennsylvania has improved, with Climate Power reporting in September that the number of clean-energy jobs in the state had increased to 2,881 because of new projects in areas such as hydropower manufacturing, solar energy and electric vehicles. But more needs to be done.

Dr. Regli has sought to educate stakeholders and address the shortfalls, and he lauds the Endowments for its capacity-building work.

"None of this works without folks like The Heinz Endowments stepping into the breach," he said.

With Endowments support, communities and nonprofit organizations across the region are building the capacity to take part in needed change throughout the region and the nation. Here are a few of their stories.

THE HUB

Launched in February 2024, the SWPA Municipal Project Hub, which has its office in Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville neighborhood, provides hands-on support and technical assistance to regional municipalities, school districts and nonprofits pursuing funding through the IRA. It was established with a \$1.25 million grant from the Endowments.

As Mr. Barron and other Endowments staff members were preparing to request \$10 million in IRA-related funding from the Endowments' board, they surveyed approximately 100 grantees and other regional stakeholders about their readiness to take advantage of this opportunity.

"What we heard resoundingly was that people needed capacity," Mr. Barron said. Survey respondents indicated they saw significant gaps in their readiness to apply for grants and to deploy the funds effectively. "We used that data to build the concept of the hub to be an intermediary, an information disseminator, a hand-holder to the region to fill in those gaps as much as we could," he said.

For many municipalities, said Megan Zeigler, chief executive officer of the hub, the day-to-day demands of governance prevent leaders from dreaming big.

"Planning goes by the wayside" when a mayor or city council is forced to react to a crumbling building or water main break, Ms. Zeigler said. And yet that planning is critical in setting priorities, defining values and bringing people together, she explained.

The hub's work takes many forms, from providing assistance with grant writing to holding workshops around upcoming opportunities that have served not only to inform regional stakeholders but also to break down the silos that can exist among neighboring municipalities, each of which can get caught up in its own concerns and challenges.

"Especially for federal grants, these applications need to be bigger, usually involving multiple municipalities," Ms. Zeigler said. "Looking beyond your boundaries to have competitive applications has been really key.

"The hub currently has funding through December 2025, and the majority of the IRA discretionary grant funding will expire in 2026. This means our region has approximately 15 months to build capacity and momentum to take advantage of many of these opportunities," she added. "It's hard, but we can do hard things, and securing these federal funds now can be that launching point for more thoughtful and strategic investments in the future."

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The United Mine Workers of America Career Centers, established in 1996, helps mineworkers who have been displaced from the industry, providing training as they pivot to new careers in the clean-energy economy. One recent initiative has employed these workers in capping the region’s many abandoned mines.

But at the Ruff Creek training facility, the UMWA Career Centers also runs a highly successful, hands-on mechatronics program, says Clemmy Allen, executive director. The program includes training in hydraulics, pneumatics and automated control, and graduates are being hired, many before they’ve even completed the course.

Thanks to a \$100,000 grant from the Endowments, the UMWA Career Centers was able to raise \$750,000 in matching funds in order to receive a \$2.9 million award from the Southwest Pennsylvania Commission. (That funding became available through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, adopted to help alleviate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.)

“Without the matching funds, this program would not have ever been possible for the Career Centers,” Mr. Allen said.

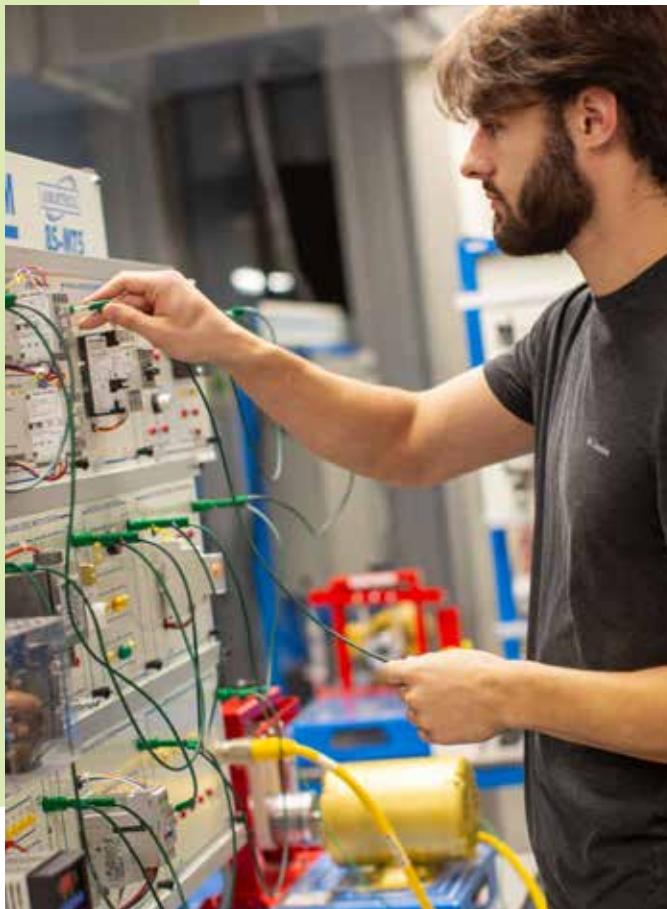
The Career Centers’ work to create bright futures for displaced mineworkers exemplifies the ways in which the emerging clean-energy economy is forging new partnerships, many unimaginable just a decade or so ago.

“A lot of the things going on today, 20 or 25 years ago would have been sacrilegious to get involved with [for] some of these groups,” said Mr. Allen, citing recent conversations among the Career Centers, the United Mine Workers Association, and manufacturers of electric-car batteries and solar panels about training mineworkers for jobs in these facilities. “Previously there was very little interaction. We’re still in the early stages, but the future may bring a partnership with these people.”

Andrew McElwaine, vice president of Sustainability for the Endowments, noted that he is now having the kinds of conversations about the viability of clean-energy sources with corporate America and start-up companies that he recalls having in environmental circles more than a decade ago. The landscape is shifting dramatically, he said, making the manufacture of solar panels and electric-vehicle batteries not just environmentally friendly but also potentially profitable.

“We’ve been in an economic transition in this region since 1979, when the first mills began to close,” he said. “Now, long-held economic development aspirations are finally being realized because clean tech and IRA financing are bringing back manufacturing jobs, which is happening for the first time in decades.”

Trenten Kobertz, 19, of Richeyville, Pennsylvania, is a student in the mechatronics program at the Ruff Creek campus of United Mine Workers of America Career Centers in Greene County, Pennsylvania. Mr. Kobertz is using an electric motor control learning system designed to help students understand the electric relay control of air conditioning motors in both industrial and residential settings, so that they can design, install, operate and troubleshoot air conditioning motor control circuits.



Bridget McKenna

REIMAGINING APPALACHIA

Based in Bridgeport, West Virginia, ReImagine Appalachia received a \$450,000 Endowments grant in 2024 to support its work repurposing shuttered coal plants, among other projects in the Ohio River Valley, which includes parts of Pennsylvania, Ohio and Kentucky as well as West Virginia.

The nonprofit played an important role in shaping the IRA and in educating regional policymakers about the importance of supporting it and the sustainable development priorities of local stakeholders, particularly in West Virginia.

“We really began in 2020 with the goal of making sure that as climate change debates were heating up, Appalachia was at the table. Otherwise, we’d be on the menu,” said co-Director Amanda Woodrum, referring to the harm to the region’s people and environment that would continue because of extractive energy practices.

In seeking to make sure that the infrastructure package met Appalachian priorities, the group convened a vast array of stakeholders, including those connected with organized labor, racial justice and environmental causes, along with local government leaders.

“By coming together across the four-state region, we created collective leverage and helped turn the conversation into a more productive one by creating a list of, essentially, what Appalachia would need to become a leader in the new clean-energy economy,” Ms. Woodrum said. “We helped fuel prosperity across the country, with the result that our lands were damaged and our workers became sick, and so we deserve our fair share.”

As with Ms. Zeigler’s work with the hub, ReImagine Appalachia works with small communities that have part-time mayors and volunteer city councils that are busy dealing with the latest crises.

“They’re wondering, ‘What even are my options?’ and so there’s a lot of support that needs to happen in regions like ours before you start pumping funds in,” Ms. Woodrum said. “Otherwise, those funds will just go to the same old political channels.”

Obtaining funds from the IRA is just half the job, Ms. Woodrum said. It’s imperative to make sure the money is spent the right way so as to ensure that the work keeps going and future investments keep coming.

“Everyone wants sustainable and equitable development, but you have to empower workers to participate, and that takes time,” Ms. Woodrum said. “If we truly build out a worker- and community-centered, sustainable, equitable development strategy for coal country, we can turn this region into leaders of the new economy and permanently change the politics around national climate solutions.”

Even in the wake of the presidential election results, she noted that the IRA directed a vast amount of its resources toward rural communities, many of them represented by Republican lawmakers who may be reluctant to see the economic gains of those communities undone by repealing the IRA. Finding new and effective ways of talking about IRA-driven successes—and future opportunities—across Appalachia will be a key priority at ReImagine Appalachia’s strategy summit in early 2025.

“We got a glimpse of the world we want to live in, and that’s hard to take back,” said Ms. Woodrum. “And so, we’ll keep on keeping on. There’s still a lot of opportunity on the table to find the work and do it.”



Duane Prokop

U.S. Rep. Summer Lee, (D-Pa.) left, walks with Pittsburgh Gateways Corporation president and CEO Don Evans at the Energy Innovation Center in the city’s Hill District in August. Both participated in a Clean Energy Business Roundtable hosted at the center by The Heinz Endowments and Climate Power, the latter of which is an environment-focused, strategic communications organization based in Washington, D.C. Participants discussed western Pennsylvania’s role in clean-energy innovation and federal investments in the sector.

Sarah Ralich, senior energy and construction manager at ACTION-Housing Inc., stands in front of Crafton Towers, a 103-unit senior high-rise in Crafton, a borough about 6 miles from Pittsburgh. Ms. Ralich applied for and obtained a \$6.18 million grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to support a full energy-efficiency retrofit of Crafton Towers, which included solar paneling to produce 86% of the building’s energy on-site and new, energy-efficient windows. The grant is part of the Inflation Reduction Act-funded Green and Resilient Retrofit Program.



Bridget McKenna

A CONTINUING STORY

WORKING TOGETHER

Sarah Ralich was hired at ACTION-Housing Inc. with a \$200,000 grant from the Endowments. She identified, applied for and won a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grant worth \$6.18 million to support the full energy-efficiency retrofit of Crafton Towers, a 103-unit senior high-rise in Crafton, a borough about 6 miles from Pittsburgh. The grant is part of the IRA-funded Green and Resilient Retrofit Program.

The building has not seen a significant upgrade since it was built in 1974. The retrofit, slated for early 2025, will equip the high-rise with solar paneling that is modeled to produce 86% of the building's energy on-site and new, energy-efficient windows.

That retrofit is among the most dramatic examples of IRA funds supporting energy-efficient renovations that will benefit area residents. It's also an example of the kind of "proof of concept" project that Ms. Ralich, along with partners at the Endowments, hope will only accelerate the ongoing momentum propelling the clean-energy movement.

ACTION-Housing is also part of a Solar for All application that has received funding. The program will deliver affordable and reliable solar power to low-income Pennsylvanians and environmental justice communities. And the group has been working with regional partners to create a single intake form that homeowners and renters can use to request services like heat pump replacements, energy audits and other clean-energy improvements. The goal is to make it easier to take advantage of the many programs available rather than making people seek out assistance from several different organizations.

"As a region, we've all collectively been good at building coalitions and going in on applications together," Ms. Ralich said. "The foundation community has been a big part of organizing meetings. No one is doing things in a vacuum, and it's really helpful because we're not all submitting applications for the same things. Instead, we're working together."

Although the IRA involves a staggering amount of money, once funds are apportioned by region and divided among the legislation's priority areas, the funds disbursed locally are not quite as transformative as they first appear to be, Ms. Ralich pointed out.

"So, we need to all work together," she said, "to get the biggest bang for the buck."

The next year will bring many IRA- and Endowments-supported projects to life. But the change-making impact of the IRA is not close to running its course.

Just as it has taken several years for IRA funds to show up in communities, said Brian Regli of Gov. Shapiro's Office of Critical Investments, it may take time for the nonprofit community to fully appreciate the power of tax credits in the legislation.

"What the legislation is doing is rewarding entrepreneurial risk," he said. "But you've got to do the thing to get the thing."

An organization that wants 30% of the cost of its solar-panel project funded, said Dr. Regli, has to raise funds for the project, and it will then receive a 30% tax credit. Unlike grant applications, which may not be selected for funding, tax credits are noncompetitive and are not capped at a certain dollar amount.

That makes the Endowments' vision, advocacy and support so critical, grantees said. By helping regional municipalities and nonprofit organizations implement their plans for a clean-energy future, The Heinz Endowments is trying to spark the kind of epochal change that the IRA is seeking to promote.

"If you're not helping these organizations do the thing, you're not helping," Dr. Regli said. "And Heinz is helping." h