**Welcome and Opening Plenary: Perspectives on a Just Transition**

**Panelists include:** Justin Maxson, President of Mountain Association for Community Economic Development; Sue Talichet, Chairperson for Kentuckians for the Commonwealth; Ivy Brashear, KFTC member and journalist; Gerry Roll, Director of the Foundation for Appalachian, Kentucky; Benny Massey, City Council member from Lynch, KY; Todd Howard, Floyd County farmer and community leader; Anthony Flaccavento, a 2012 Congressional candidate, farmer, and community development practitioner from southwestern Virginia; Joe Uehlin, Director of Labor Network for Sustainability

**Sue Talichet:** Sue opened by pointing out that Appalachia is a rich culture, has an abundance of natural resources, and hardworking people. We can choose to promote clean water and healthy communities; run for office; collaborate; start businesses; etc. The conference is proof of that. Coal jobs are declining and ready or not transition is happening all around us and fast. Coal is running out and they call it economically recovering coal, but when they cannot make any profit they will leave and leave us behind. What kind of future do we want for ourselves and our communities? We need to make economic change instead of letting it happen to us. What is a just transition? An intentional effort to improve our quality of life, change communities, and improve our quality of life; taking steps to build skills, opportunities and wealth and protecting the natural resources from which our health and economy demand. Our agenda is loaded with opportunities to learn from others across the state and across the country who are working toward a just transition. They show us what is possible and give us opportunities to do this in Eastern Kentucky. We need to build new power. New clean energy power from renewable sources. New economic power. Building new political power by electing leaders who share our vision. What you do to the land you do to the people and we all bear the scars. Let’s start by treating each other better and treating each other well.

**Justin Maxson**: I’m a Kentuckian who has had the great priveledge to work with MACED for the past 10 years. For the last two years they supported more than 70 small businesses and helped with energy efficiency and sustainability. What is clear is that none of us have all the answers, but if you take anything away I hope it is this: We have many assets to build from and many more than we believe and what we have to do is knit the pieces together with a vision for Appalachian transition with a movement that is big enough to build that bright future in the mountains. For years we have been told that E. Ky “isn’t” and “won’t” and “cannot”, but when did we start to believe it? We are talking about an intentional effort to improve the lives of those who have been affected by economic distress. We need three things: Vision, Strategy, and Leadership.

Four development strategies: 1. Enterprises and Entrepreneurs; 2. Key Sectors 3. Support workers 4. Generate long-term investments. There are movements in these four strategies, but they are not strong enough yet. All of these take much better collaboration, better policy, but none of them will move without leadership. We expect each person on our team to show great leadership and we need to develop better leadership. We need better political leaders, but we also need to be leaders ourselves, such as entrepreneurs, artists, youth, etc. We need a movement with Vision, Leadership, and Strategies that includes many hard conversations.

**Benney Massey:** Born in Lynch, worked in a coal mine for 30 years, served on city council for 17 terms, active in Lynch as a Deacon and in the community. His main issues is water. “We have the best water in the world in Lynch and can supply the nation. Everything is built on water. We are connecting waters system in Benham, Lynch, and Cumberland and I want to push to put a water plant for all three cities to come together to supply the nation. We have the resource. On the coal issue, coal is fading out, but gas is coming in. They don’t talk about gas, but they are getting a lot of natural gas. The new generation is here and let them use gas and water. We have the resources and now it’s time for the new generation to use it. The old generation is coal. We are changing to energy efficiency. Coal was good, but we need to change.”

**Gerry Roll:** Lives in Perry County and they spent a lot of time on really good projects and programs in Perry County, but started to think about what they were doing differently. How does all this fit together to get us where we want to go? Working on building capacity, community, and endowment and how we could get to the place where we wanted to be. Today they have more than 300 people from all different walks of life from all different places working on wellness and food systems, arts and education, economic development, etc. “We thought about where we want to be in fifty years and now what can we get just for now. People make things happen and money is just a tool. Our biggest challenge is imagining ourselves differently and believing that it is worth it.” She spoke about the importance of coming together as a region and not just working as individual communities. “It’s a new day! We can imagine ourselves to be whatever we want to be! We can set the bar for the new economy. Our leaders are aging out and it’s a matter of who steps up. Education reform is happening. Another thing we figured out is capitalize on other people’s out migration. Let’s create communities where other people’s kids want to live. Let’s build communities where people want to live. We are only captive if we have a poverty of spirit!”

**Anthony Flaccavento**: “This new economy is not just for our part of the world, but we need it in the United States of America. As we are envisioning the new economy and involving young people, one thing we have to remember is that while we may not have enough jobs we have plenty of work to do. How do we design an economy that looks at the work that needs to be done. We need to create jobs that relate to jobs that need to be done. We got kinda good at hanging in, cleaning up, and fixing, but we aren’t good at creating and preventing problems in the first place. I think that Appalachian people who were incredibly independent became very dependent. We need to bring jobs in, but if we are going to shift to being self reliant we need to think about investment capital and make self reliance our organizing principle. I think one of the most important things we can do is connect the thinkers with the doers on the ground.”

**Joe Uehlin**: “Last night we heard a lot about fighting companies and politicians who were enemies of labor and I was thinking that the same enemies of labor are the same companies that are destroying our water, atmosphere, etc, but the Unions often don’t add two and two and get four from that. They are the same enemies and we need to recognize that. We are at a point that we are unlucky at an extreme because the fuels that made our lives are causing so many problems and a climate crisis. These two crises coming together is a golden opportunity to create a better world. Transition from working people has never been right in this country. There was not social policy when corporations leave and working people bear the brunt of bad policy! We just put out a manual called jobs beyond coal and one campaign is coal to wind, KFTC’s policy, and one from Michigan. One tenet of changing social policy is that artists see the world through a different light and it’s a light that we need now more than ever. It’s our ability to inspire and help them imagine something better.”

**Todd Howard**: Farmer from Eastern Kentucky. “We have all this great energy and focus and then we get to the obstacle. Everytime we have a good idea you have hundreds of people telling you that it won’t work. Many times these ideas don’t get off the ground. We love to label people, such as ‘Friends of Coal’ or ‘tree hugger’ and never talk to find out what’s behind those labels. We look for the outside voices to come in and tell us what to do. For me, transition doesn’t come from the outside – it starts in theses small communities! We must get back to supporting our neighbor for who they are and not who they work for. Get on board or get out of the way! I want to issue each of you a challenge today: Find something that you can take home and plug into your community whether it is to volunteer your time or spend $10 on local businesses. And, lastly, transition starts with us as individuals and we need to start that ourselves.

**Ivy Brashear**: From Viper, KY and she is a journalist, writer, and a student and she is an Appalachian American and cares about where she comes from more than anything. She wants to focus on the region’s youth. She is working on her Master’s degree and was doing a focus group of young people in Perry County. Every young person wanted to stay. A couple of people told her that they moved away and came back because they did not want to be anywhere but here. She spoke about the lack of support for the educational system and the need to support that system because it directly affects young people. Schools can’t afford textbooks or working heaters, but they get coal severance dollars for Astroturf for the football field. We need to pressure people in power so they understand what is important to us. “When I think of Appalachia’s future I do not think of hopelessness . .. I see young people hopeful. Young people want to stay here and build a local economy. It gives me a pride about the people I know and where we live. I am hopeful and I know it’s possible.”