

House Republican Policy Committee Hearing
Testimony of Rod Wilt, Executive Director, Penn-Northwest Development Corporation
March 27, 2026

Testimony: Strengthening Pennsylvania's Economic Competitiveness

Good morning Members of the House Republican Policy Committee and staff. I want to thank Rep. Parke Wentling for bringing you to Mercer County. I am Rod Wilt, Executive Director of Penn-Northwest Development Corporation, Mercer County's lead economic development agency. We are a Certified Economic Development Organization (CEDO) as designated by the PA Department of Community and Economic Development. Over our 40-year history, our organization has been dedicated to rebuilding our county into the economic powerhouse it once was. As part of your packet, we have provided you with our annual program of work which is the comprehensive economic development strategy for Mercer County. This document is clearly aligned with our regional economic development strategy as outlined by the Northwest Regional Planning Commission and the Ten-Year Strategic Plan for Economic Development in Pennsylvania as presented by Governor Shapiro. And our team here at PNDC uses this document as a guide that dictates our daily, weekly, monthly activity. We take our community leadership responsibilities very seriously, as we know that we collectively have the power to systemically change our reality, and build a bright and prosperous future for ourselves and our children.

During this hearing, you will hear from many of our local business leaders who are waging the good fight against many economic headwinds and are truly creating successful opportunities for our residents. We are blessed by their steady and continuous investment and their long-term commitment to Make It in Mercer County.

Today, I want to talk about something that directly impacts our jobs, our communities, and our future: Pennsylvania's ability to compete economically, especially against our neighbor, Ohio.

At first glance, Pennsylvania appears to be in a strong position. We have one of the largest economies in the country, approaching one trillion dollars in total output. We are diverse, with strengths in healthcare, energy, agriculture, education, and finance. On paper, we should be leading. An examination of statewide economic indicators show that Pennsylvania has better numbers than Ohio in the areas of GDP growth, unemployment rates average wages.

But when we look closer—especially here in Northwestern Pennsylvania, a different story begins to emerge.

Our region, centered between Pittsburgh and Erie, has incredible assets: world-class universities, cutting-edge healthcare systems, and a proud agricultural and industrial history. And yet, many communities around us are struggling with workforce recruitment and population decline.

Now, just across the border in Eastern Ohio, we see a different trajectory.

Cities like Youngstown and Steubenville, which once faced economic challenges very similar to our own—are now benefiting from new investment, particularly in manufacturing and energy.

Meanwhile, the Columbus region has become one of the fastest-growing economic hubs in the Midwest, attracting major employers and large-scale development projects.

And it's not happening by accident.

Ohio has made a deliberate choice to compete. The state has lowered the cost of doing business, eliminated the traditional corporate income tax, and built a reputation as one of the most business-friendly environments in the country.

The impact of those decisions is visible right along our border.

Companies looking to build a new facility or expand operations often compare locations in Western Pennsylvania with sites just a few miles away in Eastern Ohio. And too often, Ohio wins—not because they have better workers or better geography, but because they offer a more competitive environment. And the state government has supported economic development at the regional level with program funding and a commitment to supporting local economic development agencies.

That means projects jobs that could be created in communities where you are visiting today, end up being built across the state line (literally less than 5 miles away) instead. This should concern all of us. Because when we lose those opportunities, we're not just losing businesses—we're losing the chance to grow our local economy, to keep young people here, and to strengthen our communities. Where population hurts the most is in our congressional delegation. Because of stagnant population growth in rural areas, Pennsylvania continues to lose seats in Congress every 10 years. As a result, Pennsylvania has fewer voices in Congress to debate issues and direct federal funding. That is why members of the Pennsylvania legislature in urban areas should really care about what is happening in the rural parts of the Commonwealth.

And the reality is, Pennsylvania has every advantage it needs to succeed. We have access to the massive energy reserves of the Marcellus and Utica Shale plays that continue to produce natural gas in abundance. We have major transportation networks. We have a highly skilled workforce. The issue is not our potential, it's our competitiveness.

If we want to compete, and win, we must act.

We need stronger, smarter state incentives that attract and retain businesses right here in Western Pennsylvania. That means reducing the tax burden on employers, streamlining regulations, and making it easier—not harder—for companies to invest in our communities.

We also need to think regionally. When a company chooses Eastern Ohio over Western Pennsylvania, the distance might only be a few miles—but the economic impact is enormous.

This is not about copying Ohio. It's about recognizing the reality that we are in direct competition—and right now, we are not doing enough to stay ahead.

Pennsylvania has the foundation to lead. But without stronger incentives and a more competitive business climate, we risk falling further behind—not just nationally, but right here at home.

The choice is ours. We can accept losing opportunities across the border—or we can take action to ensure that investment, jobs, and growth happen here, in our communities.

I believe Pennsylvania can compete. But we have to be willing to step up and make it happen.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today, and we sincerely appreciate your traveling here to meet with us and our community members.