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Joint Meeting of the Senate and House
Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees
Room 8E-A, East Wing
Main Capital Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Mr. Chairman and Honorable Members of the Committees,

I would first like to thank you for allowing myself, and my fellow constituents here with me to speak in front of these committees regarding the current funding crisis affecting these programs that are near and dear to us. I had already planned on attending the annual Extension Capital Days to help promote all of the valuable programs the extension offers when I received an email discussing this important meeting being held here today. I immediately felt compelled to ask to speak to you today because I consider myself to be in a slightly different position than any of these previous speakers before me. Let me explain.

Over the course of the last 15 years, I have been privileged to have started several companies and have employed numerous tax-paying workers in Westmoreland and surrounding counties. In 2011, I was presented the opportunity to help give back to the community. Because of the lack of in-school programs, I was fortunate to help start and sponsor the 4H robotics program in my manufacturing facility in Latrobe. In that year across the state, a grant by JC Penney allowed 9 teams to be created to compete in FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology). This program was created by Dean Kamen, otherwise known as the inventor of the Segway, and has grown to international status with over 400,000 kids now competing in its First Robotics Competition and its First Lego League. The 4H Extension robotics program in our state currently has approximately 4400 participants between the ages of 8-18. I can certainly give you breakdowns of those numbers and what areas they are in if you need. In the FRC division, which are high school aged kids, the teams have six weeks to build fully functioning robots that must work together to solve various problems on a playing field. In the Pittsburgh region alone, they compete against approximately 50 local teams, along with several teams from as far away as Canada, Michigan and Florida. Sometimes it's shooting a basket into a hoop 25 feet away, and sometimes it's climbing a 10 foot tower. As I like to say, the robots are so complicated only a high school kid could understand them.

The young men and woman that are involved in this program not only learn how to cooperate on a team level, but learn important skills that many of them carry on into the next stage of their life. They learn how to safely use numerous machine tools like mills, lathes, bandsaws, and for some, a simple screwdriver. You see, we not only pull kids in from the rural areas of the county,

but from cities like Jeanette and Greensburg. I personally have taught several how to weld and how to use a CNC plasma burning machine. They have learned about electric motors, air solenoids, and torque curves. And since so much of the robots rely on programming, we have teams within our team that specialize in Java and C++. However, this is not just nuts and bolts, but a well rounded program as well. The participants design their own websites and blogs, design t-shirts for the competition, and various marketing material so they can go out into the community and give demonstrations. They also must solicit donations from various sponsors and have complete fiscal responsibility of running the club.

But why am I telling you this? Because these same young men and woman will be the backbone to keeping our commonwealth strong in the future. With firsthand knowledge, I can speak of several young men and woman who have gone on to college in the computer and engineering programs. People like Nate Schomer, who is a third year computer engineering student at Drexel. In that short amount of time he has done robotic research at the Army Research Lab, and is currently interning with Pratt & Whitney, programming jet engines. Or somebody like Tony Ugoletti, who before joining our team, had absolutely no idea of what his future was going to be after high school. He is now a junior at the University of Pittsburgh – Johnstown studying mechanical engineering. But it's not only for kids that are thinking of going to college. We have had, and currently have, several students in the local area Vo-Tech schools that are using these same tools on a daily basis in their classes like auto repair and CNC programming.

Several of our kids have also had the opportunity to intern at the same local companies they solicited for donations, like Kencove Fence in Blairsville. There they are helping setup and maintain their servers for their internet business. My 15 year old son, Stephen, is actually helping me by using the computer aided drafting skills he learned in robotics to apply our products to bridge structures in the state of Pennsylvania. I could go on and on about the numerous young people that have passed through our programs, and would be more than delighted to share with any member the testimonials from them regarding the importance these programs have had in their lives.

These are the proud reasons I am grateful to be involved with the Agricultural Extension programs. And also why I am so concerned that the current funding crisis may impact them significantly. I would like to once again thank the committees for the opportunity to speak in front of you today. I would also like to extend my invitation to help in any way to get this crisis resolved, along with an invitation for any member of the legislature to come out and visit us at our build site in Blairsville or our meeting sight in Greensburg.

Sincerely,

Nate Kurek