No coal has ever been mined beneath the city of Bluefield during the city's 117-year history, but thanks to the natural gravity hump that led Norfolk & Western surveyors to decide on Bluefield as the site for its western-most shops, more coal has flowed through Bluefield than any other city in the region.

Time hasn’t changed the flow of coal through Bluefield, but coal’s future in the rapidly growing global energy market is changing. Still, the industry is cyclical and the price of spot market steam coal in the fall of 2006 is much lower than it was just a year before. And although metallurgical coal still provides a premium blend to steel-makers worldwide, the prices tend to follow the general steam coal market.

Last year ended on a high note with West Virginia experiencing its best year in terms of coal mine safety, but 2006 started with a tragedy the likes of which the coalfields haven’t seen in some time. On January 2, 2006, as most of America was enjoying the promise of a new year and most West Virginians were ready to cheer for the success of the West Virginia University Mountaineer football team, 13 coal miners at the Sago Mine were trapped underground in a mine explosion. Only one man – Randal McCloy – survived with the whole world watching, praying and revisiting mine safety matters over and over and over again in their minds and their hearts.

The Sago disaster didn’t sour the world’s hunger for energy. It did, however, send state and federal inspectors, mine owners and operators, as well as coal miners back to revisit the state of safety regulations and to take a comprehensive look at what is right and what is wrong with the coal industry. Not everyone has been satisfied with the conclusions to date, but the industry has been working to find a solution. It was in that context that the Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce decided to host the Bluefield Coal Symposium from Sept. 27 through Sept. 29.

“I think one thing the public doesn’t understand about the coal industry is that the industry itself is very passionate about safety,” Bill Reid, chairman of the symposium, said. “I hope that commitment to safety is one of the messages that filters out to the public from this symposium.”

Reid was the former head of EIMCO’s mine machinery plant in Bluefield. He is the editor/publisher of “Coal News,” a monthly publication based in Bluefield.

“This was not just an everything’s great kind of meeting,” Reid said. “It was a real in-depth, and sometimes very personal investigation into what’s taking place in the coal industry in the wake of the tragedies we experienced earlier this year. Hopefully, the people who attended this meeting will gain something from the ideas they heard and they will go back to their mines and show their workforces what is taking shape in terms of industry safety. Hopefully, they’ll do things that will help them feel good at home every night.”

Coal industry A-list speakers shared their views in a frank and open free-flow exchange of ideas. Don Blankenship, president and CEO of Massey Energy, let fly the opening salvo at the symposium...
reception on Wednesday evening by blasting American foreign policy in the Middle East, claiming regulators have zeroed in on the wrong problems in the coal industry, promoting coal as a tool for world peace and discussing Massey’s on-going commitment to coal mine safety that he said exceeds state and federal regulations in several areas.

“Dust management doesn’t solve problems,” Blankenship said. “U.S. technology is too busy taking dust samples and fighting wars to keep the oil flowing.” He said that it is “sad” that the nation is “willing to send children to Iraq to fight a war, but not willing to issue a (permit for) a valley fill.” He said Americans should be proud that coal is the nation’s “anchor energy” and that cheap electricity “builds prosperity.” Blankenship gave a rather thorough presentation on Massey’s safety initiatives, encouraged mine operators attending the event to take a proactive position in the advancement of coal mine safety and said that he is “betting millions of dollars” on the up-coming election because he believes the state needs to change.

On the following evening, Gov. Joe Manchin served as the symposium dinner speaker. Manchin talked about coal mine safety issues in the wake of coal mining tragedies that rocked the nation earlier this year.

“No one associated with our state’s coal industry will ever forget the early months of 2006 as we experienced a series of mining tragedies – notably the Sago mine explosion that took the lives of 12 miners and the fire at the Aracoma mine that claimed two lives,” Manchin said. He said he went to the Sago disaster because, “I felt that I could be of assistance after having experienced personal loss during the 1968 Farmington disaster.

“But the situation became a feeding frenzy of national media,” he said. “And, you know, no one gave me a book on how to deal with such a tragedy when I became governor. I did the best I could.” Manchin’s message was upbeat and positive about West Virginia’s coal industry and how the state can connect with its new-found prominence in the national energy picture. He said he was proud of the legislature’s passage of Senate Bill 247 and called it “truly historic and set the tone for a series of reforms on both the state and federal level that will have a real and lasting impact on miners and their families for many years to come.”

Debbie Hamner and her daughter, Sara (Hamner) Bailey (right), traveled to Bluefield from their home in Buckhannon to attend the symposium in hopes of finding answers to the question that has dominated their hearts and minds since January 2, when their husband and father, George Hamner, didn’t make it home from work at the Sago Mine.

“He was my best friend,” Hamner said of her husband of 32 years. She said her husband enjoyed his family, working on their farm as well as outdoor sports of all kinds. “He loved to mine coal,” she said. She expressed her appreciation for all the people who have given their support to her, her family, and all the families of the coal miners who died in the Sago disaster. “All coal miners are family,” she said. “Coal gets in your blood.”

Mrs. Hamner did not find the answer she was looking for during the safety session of the symposium that included presentations by top state and federal mine safety agencies – a group that included Ray McKinney, district manager, District 5, Mine Safety and Health Administration, Richard Gates, district manager, District 2, MSHA, Birmingham, Ala., Ron Wooten, director West Virginia Office of Miners’ Health Safety and Training, Allen Dupree, assistant district manager, District 5, MSHA, and Jeff Welsh, deputy director NIOSH, Pittsburgh, Pa.

“We were hoping for an update on Sago,” Hamner said. “That didn’t happen.” She said that the widows of the Sago coal miners gather together regularly to have lunch and talk. “If we can speak out on (the topic of safety) that’s what we want to do,” she said.

Every speaker hammered home the idea of coal mine safety. Ronald G. Stovash, senior vice president of Consol Energy Inc., noted that the industry has “made great strides” in the area of safety since the early 1900s when thousands of coal miners were dying on the job each year. He said that some of the new safety requirements this year “are already being done,” and that he hoped the several agencies can develop “consistent, uniform safety legislation.”

The experts dissected a broad range of safety issues. Juliette Hill, a mining engineer with MSHA and Mark Skiles, MSHA director of technical support, described what is being done to address various safety concerns, while Dr. R. Larry Grayson, chairman of the commission established by the National Mining Association to examine the Sago disaster, gave a report on the NMA’s recommendations.

The final session was anything but a wrap-up. Dan Gerkin, senior vice president of government and political affairs, provided insights into the state of the coal industry in the global energy picture. Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association, Bill Caylor, president of the Kentucky Coal Association and Tommy Hudson, president of the Virginia Coal Association, each provided updates on the state of the coal industry in their respective states. John Feddock, senior vice president, Marshall Miller & Associates, gave a presentation on safety measures in Kentucky’s retreat mining program.

“We have been developing a lot of these ideas since the Sago tragedy,” Jimmy Gianato, director of the West Virginia Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management said. “When it comes to safety, we’re not going to follow the train. We’re going to lead it.”

Industry leaders like Dan Pochick, president of Rish Equipment, Jack Fairchild Jr., of Fairchild International, Marshall Miller, and Gene Bailey, a retired Consol executive, were universal in their praise for the symposium.

“Communications and developing a meaningful dialogue with regulatory agencies is a very important part of the safety process,” Pochick said.

The Chamber designed the symposium – just like its predecessor event, the biennial Bluefield Coal Rally -- to serve as a forum for topics of importance to the coal industry on non-Bluefield Coal Show years. The Bluefield Coal Show will be in September of 2007.