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## Bill aims to keep WVNET in town

BY DAVID BEARD The Dominion Post

CHARLESTON — A bill to allow the Higher Education Policy Commission (HEPC) to move its offices from Charleston to the South Charleston Technology Park could now affect Morgantown through an amendment attached by local delegates.

Delegate Bob Beach, DMonongalia, supported by five others, attached an amendment to SB 611 requiring legislative approval to move WVNET — a telecommunications organization overseen by the HEPC — out of its Morgantown home.

The House passed SB 611, with the amendment, on Thursday.

WVNET is just off W.Va. 705, near Mylan Pharmaceuticals and North Elementary School. It employs about 45 people, Beach said.

During his 10 years in the Legislature, he said, one agency or another has tried to move it from Morgantown. Since it answers to the HEPC, this bill might open the door for another attempt.

“It’s a nice complement to Morgantown, I don’t think we need to be moving it around,” Beach said.

WVNET (West Virginia Network for Educational Telecomputing) provides telecommunications and computing services within West Virginia, focusing on state colleges and universities.

Beach said it’s a good, wellmanaged organization and that it’s important to keep those jobs in Morgantown.

Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, who joined in offering the amendment, agreed about keeping the jobs, and WVNET’s services, in Morgantown.

“It performs a really important function, free,” she said. And if the bill becomes law, “it gives them a little bit of security.”

WVNET Director Henry Blosser declined to comment on the amendment, and referred questions to the HEPC. HEPC Chancellor Brian Noland did not respond in time for this report.

In a statement pertinent to SB 611, Gov. Joe Manchin said the state is committed to revitalizing the South Charleston Technology Park and that he requested the HEPC to move forward on a property transfer agreement with The Dow Chemical Company, which owns it.

The new West Virginia Education, Research and Technology Park would be aimed at translating investments in higher education and research into business and economic opportunities, he said. The primary goal of the park is to create a business incubator for developing and commercializing ideas, including research in energy, chemicals and materials, and biotechnology.

Asked about the amendment, Manchin spokesman Matt Turner spoke with the governor, who said he wants to run state government as responsibly and efficiently as possible.

The amendment falls outside the intent of the bill, he said.

WVNET falls under the oversight of the HEPC, Manchin said, and it’s important to keep them linked. To the degree that the amendment separates WVNET from the HEPC, the amendment would not enhance efficiency or responsibility.

As far as the jobs go, Turner said, if a move would be contemplated in the future, the issue of employees would be up to the HEPC.

SB 611 had already passed out of the Senate. The House added this amendment and another that substitutes “in Kanawha County” for “outside of Charleston” for the location of HEPC offices.

It now goes back to the Senate for further consideration.

