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## Jefferson Lab a worthy investment



By [Preston Bryant](#)

ROANOKE.COM COLUMNIST

Preston Bryant is a Republican who has represented Lynchburg and part of Amherst County in the Virginia House of Delegates since 1996.

When state moneymen are looking for investments to make that stand to bridge the regional gaps that sometimes divide lawmakers, they need to look no further than the Jefferson Lab in Newport News. After all, there'd be something in it for most everyone.

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The lab is officially known as the Thomas Jefferson National Accelerator Facility. It's tucked behind a tuft of trees not far off the city's heavily commercial Oyster Point Road, and there is – quite literally – no other place like it in the world.

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The Jefferson Lab is home to the most powerful Free Electron Laser on the planet. It's buried several stories below ground in a mammoth concrete bunker and is 400 times more powerful than FELs at labs in Japan and Russia. It's the Virginia FEL that allows unprecedented research and advances to be made in everything from military defenses to domestic manufacturing. Most of its funding comes from the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of Energy, with dollars from each being directed to specific kinds of operations and research.

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The lab also represents a 62-university research collaborative, including a dozen Virginia institutions. In fact, it's these many institutions that, as part of the Southeastern Universities Research Association, actually operate the lab for the federal DOE. Inside its buildings are numerous smaller labs dedicated to researchers and students from Old Dominion University, the College of William and Mary, and the University of Virginia, among others. ODU alone has about a dozen shared-cost faculty appointments with the lab. And, amazingly, research done at the lab impacts a full 25 percent of all nuclear physics PhDs awarded by U.S. universities.

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All that the Jefferson Lab has become was certainly envisioned when the facility was planned in the mid-'80s and \$600 million in construction completed in the mid-'90s. Newport News itself built and donated the lab's \$20 million applied research center, which wasn't a bad investment at all given that today the lab employs some 700 people and has an

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annual budget of \$115 million and payroll in excess of \$50 million. And let's not forget the lab's many partnerships with secondary school teachers all across the state, which take directly into our middle and high school classrooms the kind of knowledge that universities in nations all over the world are still trying to comprehend.

It's indisputable that having the lab in Virginia is a plum for us. It's good for our state's reputation, schools and universities, and economy. It's a source of high-tech pride.

But how is it that we've allowed what in the mid-'80s to early-'90s was a consistent \$1 million yearly state investment in the Jefferson Lab to dwindle to \$600,000 a year for the past decade or so? And if the state were to bump up its investment to former levels by plowing another \$400,000 a year into the lab, what would be the benefits for doing so?

It's been noted by many that Virginia has become a regionalized state. We've become increasingly an urban versus rural state whose lawmakers often cross party lines to break along just those regional ones. And as the distribution of state tax dollars to secondary education and transportation – where wealthier urban regions help pull along the less wealthy rural areas – becomes more and more a sore point to lawmakers in fast-growing Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads, well, we'd all like to find common-sense investments that have statewide benefits.

Enter the Jefferson Lab.

As much as the lab is conducting research benefiting the federal defense and energy departments, it's also working collaboratively with Virginia companies, especially manufacturers, enhancing their processes and products, boosting their competitiveness, and securing local jobs.

Close to its home, the lab, ODU, and W&M are working with Siemens in Newport News, which employs more than 900 people. They're researching ways to improve the drilling of micro-holes in the fuel injectors Siemens makes. Their success in doing so will make Siemens increasingly competitive in the dog-eat-dog automotive industry, thereby maintaining, if not boosting in number, those local, high-paying jobs.

A couple of hours up the road, in Hopewell, the lab itself is working with DuPont Teijin Films, a worldwide company that's the leading producer of polyester films, on ways to modify the surface properties of plastics.

In the Martinsville and Henry County region, where unemployment remains well above the state average, the Jefferson Lab, ODU and W&M are collaborating with Invista Precision Concepts, which manufactures the spinnerets used by DuPont to produce Nylon, Dacron, and other such materials. IPC employs nearly a hundred people. Also in Martinsville, the lab and W&M are researching antimicrobial surfaces for Solid Stone Fabrics, which produces stretch and non-stretch fabrics for the athletic, military, and medical markets. The results of this research might well have homeland security applications. These Southside communities have deep histories in textiles, and the lab's work is helping them hang tough in that all-too-mobile market.

In Northern Virginia, at Aerospace Corporation, the lab is working to advance the microfabrication of aerospace components for picosatellites. The Air Force Research Lab is a partner in this, too. This certainly is part of homeland security.

And then, in far southwestern Virginia, the Jefferson Lab and W&M are collaborating with Blacksburg's Luna Innovations in the far-reaching area of nanotechnology, including the carbon nanotube production of stronger lightweight materials. The work they're doing will produce quantum advances in communications, energy and health care.

So when state lawmakers are looking for mutually agreeable investment opportunities, the Jefferson Lab should come to mind. Legislators' constituents in Hopewell and Martinsville and Northern Virginia and Blacksburg and lots of other places across the state benefit from the work being done in just a few buildings sitting in some woods not far off I-64 in Newport News.

Virginia is full of treasures like the Jefferson Lab. It's never far that policymakers who sometimes cross swords on regional matters need to look to find common-sense opportunities for agreement.

If only it were done more often.

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