



2021 Annual Report

The Partners for Rural America is the national organization of State Rural Development Councils Working together to improve the quality of life in rural America.



Guiding principles for State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs) from the National Farm Bill

Every Farm Bill since 2002 expresses Congressional support and encouragement for maximizing public-and-private-sector collaboration, and minimizing regulatory redundancy to empower and build the capacity of States and rural communities to design flexible and innovative responses to their own special rural development needs, with local determinations of progress and selection of projects and activities. This is highlighted by these guiding principles:

- ▶ SRDCs shall include representation from all agencies, organizations and individuals who are dedicated to enhancing economic and social opportunities for rural citizens.**
- ▶ SRDCs shall seek the support and participation of the governors of the states in which the SRDC operates.**
- ▶ Participation in SRDC decisions and operations shall be open to all who wish to participate.**
- ▶ SRDCs shall represent the diversity of states' rural populations and geography.**
- ▶ All that participate in SRDCs shall have a voice in their decision and that the SRDCs shall be free from control of any single individual, organization, agency, sector, political party or interest group.**
- ▶ SRDCs shall provide open, neutral environments where all participants' voices can be heard and where major decisions are reached, whenever possible, through consensus.**
- ▶ SRDCs shall receive financial and other support from diverse sources.**
- ▶ SRDCs shall retain an executive director to manage the operation of the SRDC if financially able to do so, and if not, the SRDC shall be operated by a working board of directors.**
- ▶ All SRDCs shall participate in the nationwide network of SRDCs known as Partners for Rural America.**

Partners for Rural America

The Partners for Rural America (PRA) was founded in 1998 to support the efforts of its member State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs), which are uniquely positioned to expand economic and social opportunities for America's rural communities and their residents, promote equal treatment of rural America by government agencies and the private sector and provide a collective voice for rural America. SRDCs across the country work in their states to conduct research, work with state and federal government officials, partner with other community and economic development organizations and serve as leaders representing the perspective and needs of rural communities throughout their states.

This multi-stakeholder collaborative structure creates the best possible atmosphere to help citizens and policy-makers in rural areas develop vitality-improving projects and initiatives, reduce regulatory and other barriers, address their community needs and build confidence in the local and regional development process. Rural areas often have an overburdened local leadership and local government staffs. State Councils can serve as an experienced convener and vehicle for collaboration.

Issues vary from state to state, but most SRDCs work to improve community and economic development, education, workforce training, infrastructure development and access to broadband, transportation and quality healthcare, to name a few of their areas of focus. These organizations work on the ground in the communities as well as with local, state and federal government leaders to promote the assets and opportunities in rural America.

Many SRDCs provided a summary of their current activities and initiatives for this report. All councils welcome input, suggestions, ideas but most of all your support and involvement. States that would like to learn about starting a council should contact Partners for Rural America at www.partnersforruralamerica.org.

Arizona: localfirstaz.com

Idaho: irp.idaho.gov

Illinois: ruralpartners.org

Iowa: iowardc.org

Maine: growsmartmaine.org

Maryland: rural.maryland.gov

Michigan: cedamichigan.org

Missouri: mrdp.net

Pennsylvania: whsturges@gmail.com

Vermont: vtrural.org

Virginia: cfrv.org

Washington: partnersruralwa.org

Wisconsin: WIRuralPartners.org



*Working together to improve the
quality of life in rural America*

www.partnersforruralamerica.org

State Council Highlights



Arizona

Overview of 2021 Accomplishments

As the state's Rural Development Council, Local First Arizona (LFA) partners with businesses, community leaders, service organizations, economic development organizations, and rural municipalities to work directly in rural communities across the state to help build a rural Arizona economy that is sustainable, resilient, and celebratory of diverse cultures. The innovative rural development programs improve Arizona's future by driving resources into under-served communities utilizing strategies that enable them to grow economic opportunity, strengthen small businesses, retain youth and create jobs, develop robust food systems that improve healthy food access, and increase revenue through tourism. These strategies further empower cities and towns to build opportunities for those that choose, every day, to make rural Arizona their home.

Rural Workforce Development

In partnership with the State of Arizona, LFA utilizes the Talent Pipeline Management® (TPM) model across Rural Arizona to convene employer-led collaboratives to address shared workforce challenges. LFA partners with a number of local workforce boards, utilizing TPM to engage employers regionally in target sectors. LFA has convened employers in conversation in multiple industries, including manufacturing, healthcare, tourism, construction, and more. By engaging rural employers in the strategic development of skill-based talent pipelines, standardized position descriptions can be developed, job opportunities can be marketed to disconnected youth and other non-traditional workforce sources, and relationships between educators and the business sector can be improved in rural communities across the state.

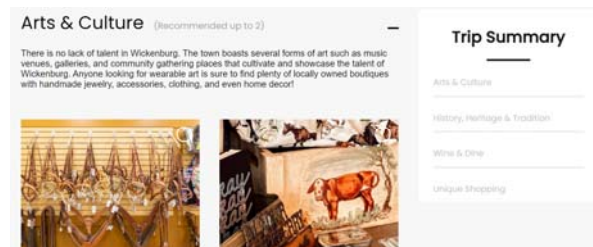


Arizona Economic Recovery Center

The Arizona Economic Recovery Center (AZERC) aims to enable more qualified Arizona cities, towns, counties, tribal communities, and nonprofits to win competitive federal, state, and foundation grants. The center serves communities statewide by researching and simplifying grants and stimulus opportunities, identifying funding sources for large and small projects, connecting funding sources to communities in need, and providing the capacity for grant writing, facilitation, and project management to ensure success rates for qualifying communities and nonprofits. Between June and December 2021, AZERC helped bring \$4.6 million in new grant dollars to Arizona, including \$1.2 million for a meat processing plant in a rural county, and \$290,000 for the Navajo Tourism Department to increase regional tourism.

Discover #RuralAZ

LFA developed online community profiles to highlight Rural AZ destinations with a goal of redirecting 10% of Arizona's current vacation spending (\$6.5B annually) into rural communities. Discover #RuralAZ launched with more than 20 profiles, which feature an itinerary building option for travelers to plan their getaway, including where they'd like to stay, dine, and discover. Once selections have been made, the custom itinerary is emailed, so it's readily available while traveling #RuralAZ!



Small Wonders Maps

Small Wonders maps are pocket-sized guides that feature locally-owned restaurants, retailers, hotels, and entertainment. This guide is utilized by both locals and visitors as a resource to find the best local businesses in each region. The maps also serve as a place-making tool by showcasing the unique character of each area, fostering community pride and keeping dollars circulating in the local economy.

It was another productive year for the Idaho Rural Partnership as we continued developing ways to support economic recovery and opportunity in Idaho's rural communities.

Many of our communities are experiencing growth challenges that have accelerated since the start of the pandemic. For example, communities across the state have identified a need for housing within reach of local wages.

The development of the Western Community Assessment Network (WeCAN) with University of Idaho Extension and our partner organizations in Montana and Wyoming continued throughout 2021. Each of the three participating states developed a **Peer Learning Network** to promote learning and leadership development and learning among rural residents.



Shoshone Falls of the Snake River in southern Idaho.

Through the three-state WeCAN collaboration, we also developed the four-week **Community Bootcamp** process that will benefit multiple communities concurrently. This process gives communities a quicker, more focused alternative to our more comprehensive Community Review process. The Bootcamp process features a series of interactive trainings and project selection and action planning by the participating communities. The first set of communities will complete the Community Bootcamp process in early 2022. More information about the Western Community Assessment Network, Peer Learning Network, and Idaho Community Bootcamp process is available at www.communityreview.org.

In 2021 we also completed Phase II of the **Blackfoot Community Review** using a new virtual process developed in late 2020 in response to the pandemic. Priority focus areas identified and addressed during the process included housing and homelessness, community identity, and recreation opportunities. Phase III of the Blackfoot Community Review is ongoing, as is Phase II of the Harrison Community Review.

In October IRP successfully hosted the **2021 Partners for Rural America annual conference**. This virtual conference featured 25 presenters and attracted over 130 participants. Conference topics included rural growth issues, broadband and the digital economy, housing, rural resiliency and recovery, and community engagement. Video recordings of all PRA conference sessions are available here: <https://vimeo.com/channels/pr2021>.

Our primary funding partners in 2021 included USDA Rural Development, Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, Idaho Department of Commerce, Bayer Crop Science, Idaho National Laboratory, Idaho Housing and Finance Association, Rocky Mountain Power, Southeast Idaho Council of Governments, Idaho Central Credit Union, Southern Idaho Tourism, Idaho Power, Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation, Idaho Community Foundation, and Partners for Rural America.



Illinois

Engaged, collaborative and committed.

Highlights from 2021

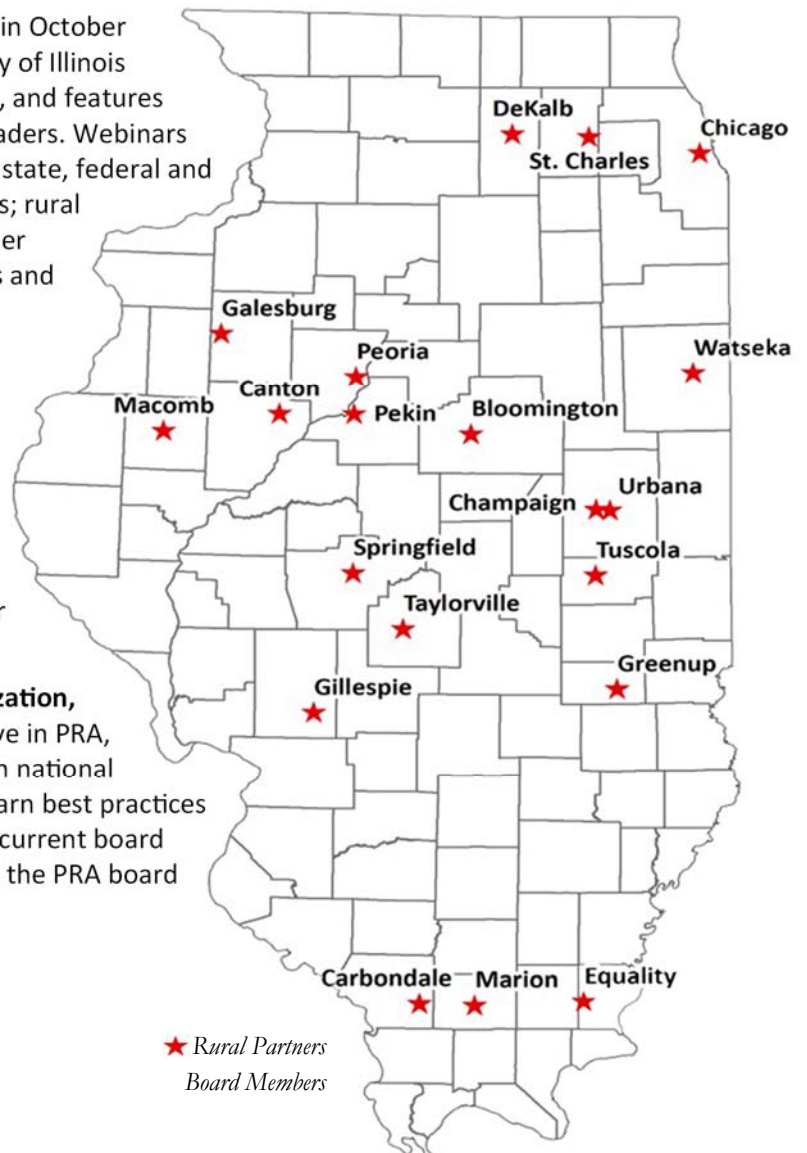
Building a Statewide Network: Illinois Rural Partners connects communities, not-for-profits, businesses, state and federal agencies, and others to create opportunities and resolve impediments to progress. Rural Partners provides networking opportunities, shares information via the website, publishes a weekly newsletter, shares success stories, identifies funding opportunities and ideas, and responds to requests for assistance and initiatives from across the state.

Member Events: The COVID-19 pandemic continued to alter our plans in 2021, but like our members, we adapted. Per usual, Rural Partners sponsored the annual Rural Community Economic Development Conference hosted by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) at Western Illinois University (WIU) and in partnership with the Governor's Rural Affairs Council (GRAC). Many of our directors and members attended the virtual conference and appreciated the content and contacts from across the country. Our annual board and membership meetings were virtual, and separate from the conference this year. We elected Illinois Rural Partners directors to new terms.

Rural Partners continued the webinar series that began in October 2020. This series is offered in partnership with University of Illinois Extension's Local Government Education (LGE) program, and features Illinois programs, experts, case examples, issues, and leaders. Webinars covered telehealth; farm/farm family stress and health; state, federal and local government programs; changing rural communities; rural economic development initiatives; substance use disorder (SUD) programs; and highlights of rural Illinois programs and resources.

Keeping You in Touch with State Government: As a member of the GRAC (Governor's Rural Affairs Council), University of Illinois Extension Partners, and other task forces, Rural Partners follows state rural development initiatives and funding opportunities to share issues and address problems facing rural communities and businesses. Rural Partners provides a voice for rural communities and organizations through these and other statewide and regional programs and organizations.

Providing Leadership and Input to the National Organization, Partners for Rural America (PRA): Rural Partners is active in PRA, the national coalition of state councils, to have a voice in national policy, programming and legislation and to share and learn best practices from across the country. Blanche Shoup, past chair and current board member of Rural Partners, represents Rural Partners on the PRA board and will soon serve as the secretary of PRA.



Recognizing Rural Champions

The 2021 Iowa Rural Summit was an opportunity—after a one-year pivot to a virtual event—to bring together leaders and rural partners from across the state. More than 200 attendees gathered near Cedar Rapids to talk about strategies to Inspire, Inform, Involve & Implement—the Summit’s annual theme. And for this 5th annual Rural Summit, the Iowa Rural Development Council (IRDC) had something special in mind.

Rural leadership and leadership development has been a priority for the IRDC for several years. And it was a key element of the Empower Rural Iowa task force when Governor Kim Reynolds established it in 2018. Empower and the IRDC are closely aligned and their efforts have focused on housing, broadband, entrepreneurship and leadership. Encouraging and supporting the next generation of rural leaders is important. But the IRDC board of directors felt it was also critical to honor those who had led the charge.



The 2021 inaugural recipients of the Iowa Rural Leadership Award pose with Iowa Rural Development Council executive committee members Mark Reinig, Sandy Ehrig and Rand Fisher.

So with the support of the IADG Community Foundation, the Rural Leadership Awards were launched. Nominees represented every corner of the state and reflected a wide array of committed individuals who had made a mark on their community, their region or their state. In all, 14 rural Iowans were honored: mayors and former mayors, economic developers, philanthropists, community developers, journalists and utility executives. The individuals were well known to all those in attendance. As one observer noted: “The first class of any Hall of Fame is going to be special!”

“We were so pleased to be able to use the 5th Annual Iowa Rural Summit as a venue to honor these individuals,” said IRDC Board President Mark Reinig. “These rural heroes exemplified the leadership and commitment necessary to help small towns and rural areas thrive. And we’re excited to continue the tradition at Rural Summits to come.”

The rural recognition will have a new name in 2022. The Rand Fisher Rural Leadership Award will honor long-time the IRDC vice-chair who retired this year.

The Iowa Rural Summit was first held in 2016 in Jefferson, Iowa. It features two days of keynote speakers, break-out sessions, networking opportunities and field trips. The ultimate goal is to share best practices from across rural Iowa and send attendees home with blueprints for action.

For more information, visit www.iowardc.org/summit or email director@iowardc.org

Supporting Communities in Navigating Change

As Maine's State Rural Development Council through USDA: Rural Development, we connect with peer organizations across the country and in partnerships across and beyond Maine. GrowSmart offers three distinct threads of programming, woven together for effective delivery of meaningful impact:

- ✓ Raising awareness and support of smart growth principles and connect Mainers with the resources, methods, and tools to manage growth and change in their communities.
- ✓ Providing leadership in building a stronger network by convening diverse stakeholders to encourage action.
- ✓ Advocating for smart growth policies, projects, and programs that allow Maine's economy to grow and prosper while conserving and enriching Maine's beautiful and productive natural spaces.



[Our Summit 2021](#) focused on economic opportunities of climate change with a focus on municipal action. Regional breakout groups discuss keynote speaker discussions.

Maine Alliance for Smart Growth (MASG) is a network brought together by GrowSmart Maine supporting economically and culturally vital downtowns and the natural areas surrounding them – working farms and forests, open space and waterfronts. MASG advocates for significant policy changes related to smart growth and its value to Maine communities. MASG released the 2020 [Economic Impact Report](#) supporting Maine's Historic Rehab Tax Credit.

Energy Efficiency Community Campaign brings the tools in the Island Institute's [Bridging the Rural Efficiency Gap](#) to inland communities. Energy efficiency is a strategic first step in climate action; meeting people where they are in an appreciation for Yankee frugality while providing comfort and safety and reducing use of fossil fuels. Our work in Windham and Biddeford began with Virtual Weatherization Webinars. Then, in collaboration with WindowDressers and AmeriCorps/Maine Energy Assistance Partnership, we hosted two "window builds" coordinating 54 volunteers to provide 207 insulating window inserts for 26 households. These were the first such events in both communities, and local leaders have pledged to continue this work for further impact in coming years.

Maine Smart Growth Awards highlight and honor projects, plans, and people across the state as they strengthen communities, protect open spaces, and build opportunity for all Mainers.

GrowSmart Maine hosted three Convening to Action in support of local efforts:

- * [More Broadband, Less Sprawl](#), March, 2021
- * [Open Streets: How to Hang Out Again](#), August 2020
- * [Securing Housing Choices for a Well-Rounded Community](#), June 2021



Maryland

Rural Maryland Council Highlights for Fiscal Year 2021

The 2021 Maryland General Assembly Legislative Session was held virtually and adjourned on April 12, 2021. Highlights for the RMC included full funding for the **Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund (RMPIF)** and the **Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund (MAERDAF)** in the State's Fiscal Year 2022 Operating Budget in the amount of \$6,118,485. The Council's Legislative Committee convened nine meetings, monitored 220 bills and submitted 60 position statements to legislators throughout the legislative session.

A major accomplishment of the 2021 Legislative Session was successful proposals to enhance broadband expansion. Appropriations included \$30 million for FY2021 rural broadband projects and **\$300 million for FY2022 rural broadband projects**. Major broadband policy passed as well, including the codification of the **Office of Statewide Broadband**, while keeping the Rural Broadband Assistance Fund open for federal funding. The **Digital Connectivity Act of 2021** was passed as well to ensure that every resident of the State is supported by high-quality broadband Internet service at an affordable price and has the tools necessary to use and take advantage of the Internet. The Legislature also approved a state-wide **"Dig Once"** policy to incentivize and lower costs of broadband infrastructure improvements.



Lieutenant Governor Boyd Rutherford, Secretary of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Jeannie Haddaway-Riccio, and the Rural Maryland Council Chair John Hartline at Lawyers Mall during the Maryland Day event.

Rural Maryland Day was held virtually this year on February 11, 2021. The event provided an opportunity for over 100 rural advocates to meet one-on-one with key legislators to discuss both the strengths and challenges of rural Maryland. Recognitions of the day included a Department of Agriculture Secretary's Citation and both a Senate and House resolution recognizing the Council's 25th anniversary. The event concluded with a video message from the Governor and the presentation of a digital proclamation. The event was a great success and we thank everyone who attended virtually.

On December 1 and 2, 2021, the Council hosted the **2021 Rural Summit: "Redefining Resilience and Recovery."** The Summit had more than 200 rural advocates attend for the two-day event that consisted of 16 breakout sessions, 3 plenary sessions, and several guest speakers that included Governor Larry Hogan, USDA Under Secretary for Rural Development Xochitl Torres, Maryland Comptroller Peter Franchot, and the Summit's keynote speaker Whitney Kimball Coe.



2021 Rural Summit attendees



Vermont

Community Facilitation

VCRD leads strategic action planning sessions to help communities set key priorities and connect with resources to advance them. In 2021, VCRD led community facilitation processes in Londonderry, Mendon, Bradford, Barre, Milton, and Rochester Vermont. Volunteer task forces are now lined up in these communities to expand affordable housing; develop a community center; revitalize the town center; boost town capacity, expand recreational facilities and programming; build a skate park; implement electric vehicle charging, weatherization, solar siting, and energy retrofits for municipal buildings; and more. With support from USDA Rural Development, VCRD welcomed a new team member to provide follow up support to communities with additional, timely capacity. This role helps to bolster local leaders who have stepped up to implement priority initiatives with connections to resources, troubleshooting, grant-writing assistance, and more.



As Covid cases declined in the summer of 2021, we were able to gather for a community dinner as part of our Bradford Community Visit process.

Vermont Community Leadership Network

VCRD's **Vermont Community Leadership Network** offers support for new, emerging, and veteran community leaders through training and coaching, connections to resources, and more as they work to advance local projects. The Network also provides opportunities for small groups of leaders to come together around focused areas of action, building a shared sense of common purpose, learning, support, and success through periodic gatherings, mentor pairings, and online collaboration tools. We have recently been supporting 2 networking cohorts—the **Climate Catalysts Program** participants receive support in their work developing a local climate economy project or initiative, and the **Community Response and Recovery Corps** supported leaders working to address the challenges of the pandemic and help Vermont emerge stronger. We are convening another cohort in the next few months to support **Community Visit Task Force Chairs**.

The Vermont Proposition

The Vermont Proposition effort is a sweeping initiative based on the input of hundreds of creative Vermonters and thought leaders—thousands if you count all those that have contributed to our community processes, participated in community leadership events, or convened to contribute to Vermont policies for the future. The goal is to build a non-partisan policy framework for the key actions the state needs to take over the next five years in order to thrive over the next thirty. In May 2021, we welcomed 700 participants from all backgrounds and corners of the state to the virtual **Summit on the Future of Vermont** to review The Proposition draft from all sides and consider ways to move each element forward. The draft Proposition was then refined into a next version which you can find here: futureofvermont.org/vt-proposition. In 2021, VCRD completed a deep stakeholder analysis and selected a diverse, dynamic group of 23 leaders from around the state to initiate the **Future of Vermont Action Team** to guide strategy efforts toward further defining and implementing key proposition elements. Achieving the aspirational goals laid out in the Proposition will take time, and VCRD established the **Partnership for the Future of Vermont** to help show widespread support to make the Proposition's elements a reality. Learn more about the Proposition effort and join the Partnership here: futureofvermont.org/.



Working Lands Initiative

VCRD convenes the **Working Lands Coalition** as the crucial promoter of investment in farm and forest enterprises. To date, VCRD's work alongside the Coalition partners has helped secure \$7 million in new direct investment, leveraged an additional \$11 million, supported 241 grantees across all 14 Vermont counties, and helped create more than 500 jobs and \$36 million in new sales supporting the local economy. This year, we are helping to lead an effort to secure \$15 million in new investment over three years for Vermont working lands enterprises as a vital foundation for the future of Vermont.

The Virginia Rural Center

The Virginia Rural Center (The Center) continued to advance prosperity throughout rural Virginia, and successfully launched The Virginia Rural Leadership Institute, a new initiative designed to address and mitigate the population loss occurring in many rural areas. The Center is a partnership of the Center for Rural Virginia, a Virginia legislative entity advocating for rural policy, and the Council for Rural Virginia, an entity organized by federal statute that is a conduit for building rural capacity by facilitating the collaboration and creation of coalitions of the key economic regions and sectors of the Commonwealth. Accomplishing this mission, The Center gathers stakeholders to raise awareness of rural issues through several annual events.

Governor's Summit for Rural Prosperity – The Center convened a two-day summit focusing on economic development and community vibrancy, featuring experts from across Virginia. The event occurred on Nov. 4-5, 2022 at Longwood University in Farmville, VA. The summit was an opportunity to discuss innovative ways to bring greater prosperity to rural communities throughout Virginia. The goal of this year's summit was to ignite growth in vital rural regions by bringing together stakeholders both virtually and in person. Highlights included a sneak peek of the 2022-2026 Virginia Rural Health Plan and Data Commons; updates on the U.S. Census and regional economic development opportunity; panels on regional entrepreneurship and vibrancy and successful broadband partnerships; and an interactive tour of community revitalization projects in Farmville.



Governor Ralph Northam speaking at The Center's premier event, The Governor's Summit for Rural Prosperity

Rural Caucus Legislative Reception – More than 300 business and government leaders attended the 2022 Rural Caucus Reception in Richmond. Governor Youngkin, Lt. Governor Sears and Attorney General Miyares all were featured speakers at the event, which is a joint effort of The Virginia Rural Center, Virginia Association of Counties' Rural Caucus, and the General Assembly's Rural Caucus. The Rural Caucus consists of legislators who represent rural communities in Virginia and meets weekly during the General Assembly session to discuss the impact that proposed legislation has on rural Virginia. The Executive Director at the Virginia Rural Center serves as staff to the rural caucus and tracks legislation.



Virginia Rural Leadership Institute Inaugural Cohort meeting in Danville, VA

Virginia Rural Leadership Institute – The Virginia Rural Center officially launched The Virginia Rural Leadership Institute (VRLI), which is the Commonwealth's first and only leadership program focused entirely on retaining, attracting, and developing rural Virginians into innovative, responsible, and civic minded leaders who build strong local and regional communities, bringing rural prosperity across the entire Commonwealth. VRLI is not just a one-year leadership program, but instead the beginning of a lifelong commitment to better serve rural Virginia. In addition to leadership training and education sessions over the course of a year, the Cohort is required to complete a Community Impact Project, which will give an immediate return on investment in many communities.

Seeking a Prosperous and Sustainable Future

During 2021, PRWA continued its work to develop a telehealth clinic in the small Eastern Washington town of Garfield, Southeast of Spokane, after a community survey demonstrated a strong need for a local clinic. Despite a temporary setback as to which entity would operate the clinic, Whitman Hospital and Medical Clinics has agreed to staff and manage the facility. The Port of Whitman completed a broadband expansion project in November to provide fiber to the premise (FTTP) service in Garfield, including the clinic building. Approximately \$20,000 is needed to make the space functional, with \$4200 secured by the local health district via grant funding, and the remaining amount covered by a grant obtained by PRWA (\$16,000). The clinic is expected to open by the end of April 2022.

PRWA is also focused on the expansion of broadband to underserved areas of Eastern Washington. After Lincoln County was able to apply for state funding to expand broadband to underserved areas in their county with the help of Petrchor, a consortium of six Washington ports to expand broadband access, PRWA approached Adams County and Fairfield about opportunities to expand broadband services. Word of this assistance reached officials in Ritzville and they, too, reached out for PRWA assistance. Multiple, collaborative proposals were submitted to the Public Works Board and State Broadband Office. PRWA was also instrumental in securing \$20,000 for Adams County officials to use toward matching funds or other costs related to broadband expansion. Partnerships formed with Petrchor, and local governments also have the potential to provide a monthly income stream for towns or counties whose grant applications are funded. PRWA and Petrchor are working together to bring additional communities and counties in the ten county area on board and assist with application preparation free of charge.

PRWA has been working with the City of Harrington to explore their community development needs and identify funding opportunities and has met with officials and community volunteers to develop projects and applications. PRWA is also providing training for several volunteer grant writers in the city so they can continue to seek additional funding.

PRWA is continuing its outreach to the ten county area in Eastern Washington, contacting rural county governments and officials in towns with fewer than 5,000 people to see what assistance is needed to help these areas thrive. As a result of this effort, PRWA has received “some great testimonials for future funding requests.” In September, PRWA applied to Banner Bank for additional financial support and has plans to seek additional financial assistance for our work through 2022 from other public and private sources.

Wisconsin Rural Partners Active in Rural Prosperity Commission

Like any asset of value, Wisconsin's rural communities require preservation, cultivation and investment. That is why Wisconsin Rural Partners, Inc. (WRP) was so pleased when, on Jan. 22, 2020, Governor Tony Evers announced the creation of the Blue-Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity. He charged the Commission with gathering public input on current and future challenges in rural Wisconsin and submitting a plan to him on how to invigorate rural communities and businesses. The Office of Rural Prosperity (ORP) was created to coordinate the Commission's work.



Of course, effectively serving rural stakeholders requires a full understanding of their unique challenges, as well as a healthy respect for the local insights, networks and resources available to both identify and implement solutions. WRP was in a unique position, as the federally designated State Rural Development Council for Wisconsin, to assist in the collection of information from rural constituents and had a existing forum for bringing rural folks together to address potential solutions.

As a new agency with limited staff, ORP looked to create a network of interested and involved partners. WRP immediately stepped forward to provide vital assistance in organizing activities and the dissemination of the Commission's mission and agenda. ORP recognized that WRP should have an integral role in the Commission's work. WRP's involvement was even more important because the Commission began its work in the midst the COVID-19 health crisis, and the resulting economic downturn.

The Commission held three virtual public forums, called "Conversations with the Commissioners". With WRP actively promoting the Commission "Conversations," collectively over 500 participants attended the forums. WRP, through its website and Facebook page, also worked within its network to have partners submit written comments and ideas to the Commission. The Commission received 45 written submissions from individuals and groups across the state.



The final report, **Rural Voices for Prosperity**, reflects the entirety of these conversations between the Commission and rural stakeholders providing the Commission's recommendations:

1. Create and appropriately resource a place within the Wisconsin state government that understands and champions the unique attributes of rural Wisconsin—including Native Nations.
2. Continue the governor's efforts to make the needs and priorities of rural communities and Native Nations a forethought, rather than an afterthought.
3. Take an "all-of-government approach" to doing right by rural and tribal communities. Charge the



4. Ensure rural places and Native Nations in rural Wisconsin get a fair shake in accessing state and federal resources.
5. Look beyond Wisconsin's borders for good ideas.
6. Unleash the full power of communities to innovate and act by updating state laws that restrict local agency.
7. Reinvest in the Wisconsin Idea and the University of Wisconsin, its satellite campuses, and our state's network of community and technical colleges as unique and valuable assets.
8. Rebalance state business incentives to ensure economic development prioritizes the assets of Wisconsin people, communities and businesses.
9. Invest in vital ingredients for our better future.
10. Continue the work of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity.

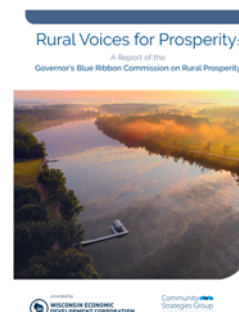
The report also identifies "Findings" which are the big picture steps critical to advancing rural prosperity in Wisconsin. The "Findings" are the result of rural stakeholders input including challenges that are stifling rural prosperity and opportunities to address those challenges.

These "Findings" require further exploration and discussion. WRP has again stepped forward and will be hosting discussions with our partners over the coming months. Through our Annual Rural Summit and regional Small Community Forums, WRP will be active in:

- Strengthening rural leadership,
- Sharing and promoting best practices and success stories from rural communities,
- Helping support rural youth leadership development and multigenerational learning,
- Promoting innovative and collaborative solutions,
- Supporting efforts to build local capacity, and
- Encouraging state support for local and regional planning and development.

There is much work ahead to address the challenges and opportunities facing Wisconsin's rural communities. WRP welcomes the opportunity and stand ready to provide active support and direct involvement. This **Rural Voices for Prosperity** report only lays the groundwork for a sustained strategy aimed at building and maintaining prosperity across rural Wisconsin. The critical work to achieve this goal will lie with WRP and similar organizations to work collaboratively to create vibrant rural communities.

The **Rural Voices for Prosperity** Report is available in PDF format and may be downloaded by visiting: https://wedc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Web_Governors-Blue-Ribbon-Commission-Report.pdf







Cover photo courtesy of Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

2022 PRA officers:

CHAIR: Bill Menner, Iowa Rural Development Council

VICE-CHAIR: Jon Barrett, Idaho Rural Partnership

SECRETARY: Blanche Shoup, Illinois Rural Partners

TREASURER: Charlotte Davis, Rural Maryland Council

CHAIR EMERITUS: Jessica AcMoody, Rural Partners of Michigan

AT LARGE: Kimber Lanning, Arizona Rural Development Council



Working together to improve the quality of life in rural America

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