

Creating Opportunity and Prosperity Through Strengthening Rural-Urban Connections

THE RURAL – URBAN NARRATIVE

Metropolitan and rural America are highly connected and interdependent. To succeed, metropolitan America needs a healthy and sustainable rural economy and culture, and in turn rural America needs vibrant, well-functioning cities and suburbs to thrive and flourish.¹ Yet, the prevailing national narrative pits urban versus rural for investments and public resources, and official statistical definitions often create hard lines between urban and rural, and metropolitan and non-metropolitan.²

If metropolitan America is to drive national prosperity, then to succeed it will need a healthy and sustainable rural economy and culture, and if rural America is to flourish, it will need vibrant, well-functioning cities and suburbs

For most families and businesses, however, there is no clear distinction between urban and rural places. Flows of people, capital, goods, and information continually blur political and geographic boundaries. People commute to work, make family visits, or take trips and vacations. Businesses source materials and labor across regions largely ignoring rural-urban boundaries, and sell their goods and materials to customers irrespective of their locations. Rural economies and places supply food,

energy, workers, and ecosystem services while urban economies and places provide markets, capital, jobs, and specialized services, reinforcing a productive and deepening interdependence. Both rural and urban communities offer to each other a wealth of recreation and cultural opportunities.

Sometimes these interactions do not lead to positive outcomes for rural regions and communities. A recent study in Appalachia suggests investments in urban centers do not necessarily yield economic benefits that readily trickle out to rural communities; in fact, investments in rural economies often create more economic benefits for the urban cores than for rural communities.^{3,4} Moreover, weaker institutional and civic capacity in many rural communities makes it harder for them to compete on an equal footing with their urban counterparts to foster productive, mutually beneficial interactions on issues such as transportation, land use, and economic development.

A report prepared for the Ford Foundation's *Wealth Creation in Rural Communities* initiative provided four detailed examples of rural-urban linkages.⁵ These described forestry and wood products in Oregon, regional



food systems in Louisiana, bio-plastics in Nebraska, and wind energy in Texas, and provided some understanding of the challenges and rewards associated with efforts to realize the potential of rural-urban connections.

This issue brief describes some ways in which regional development organizations⁶ and other regional entities are recognizing the importance of connecting rural regions and urban centers. As yet, most of these connections are incidental to other efforts rather than intentional strategies, but it is possible to see three broad approaches that show promise for regional economic development by strengthening rural-urban linkages. These are:

- Actions to level the playing field for rural residents and businesses so that they are not unduly penalized by distance and lack of economies of scale
- Actions intended to increase opportunities for interaction and employment
- Actions to expand economic development

The following sections provide brief case studies on efforts underway across the country to support rural-urban connections in the areas of broadband development, disaster resilience, transportation, and food systems.



Downtown Sacramento is surrounded by abundant recreation opportunities and some of the most productive agricultural land in the world. Source: SACOG

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Broadband

Broadband offers many great opportunities to overcome the barriers of distance and transportation costs in rural America, as well as the achievement of economies of scale without penalizing rural residents. According to the *2015 Broadband Progress Report* from the Federal Communications Commission, 17 percent of the total U.S. population and over half of all rural Americans lack access to advanced broadband service.⁷ Barriers to local service often revolve around high costs, infrastructure development, planning logistics, and the political opposition by private broadband services that oppose municipally-owned Internet Service Providers. Despite these challenges, access to broadband and high-speed Internet can improve rural outcomes in healthcare, civic engagement, and education.

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Access to healthcare services remains a major challenge for rural residents. Shortages of physicians and fiscal pressures on small, rural hospitals mean that rural people may have to travel long distances to urban centers to get the care they need. Telemedicine allows for remote diagnoses and treatments, the exchange of patient records, X-rays, scans, and test results, and effective communications between primary care providers and specialists. It also provides for electronic scheduling, billing, and payments.

Improved access to broadband also allows citizens to participate in their government and to receive services. It fosters the sharing of information and collaboration between local governments, school districts, emergency services, and regional, state, and federal agencies. Increasingly, interaction with government is dependent on high speed Internet access, such as filing tax returns, accessing small business resources, regulatory compliance, and licensing of vehicles and businesses.

Finally, broadband connections allow a full range of educational resources and opportunities to be accessed by rural schools. High-speed broadband networks enable schools to offer a broader range of courses and programs to students, exposes new teaching and learning methods, and provides the capacity to share data and information between parents, teachers, students, and



The Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative recently completed their “fiber-to-the-premise” broadband project, providing access throughout two of Kentucky’s most economically distressed rural counties. In the image above, PRTC staff lead USDA Under Secretary Lisa Mensah on a tour of their operations center in McKee, Kentucky. Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

administrators. This network not only improves the life-long prospects of rural children, but also fosters deeper connections and networks across regions.

The Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative (PRTC) in Kentucky has been instrumental in the development of broadband access throughout two of the most impoverished counties in the state, earning designation as a *Smart Rural Community Winner* by the NTCA – The Rural Broadband Association. The Cooperative covers 542 rural and mountainous square miles of Jackson and Owsley counties, serving a population of over 18,000 people.⁸ PRTC has developed infrastructure for broadband expansion that serves over 95 percent of the two-county region, leading to greater opportunities for economic development. Teleworks USA, Inc., an intermediary nonprofit organization that connects individuals seeking employment with companies in need of teleworkers, has greatly benefited from this infrastructure, expanding the type of telework opportunities available in the region.

Based in eastern Kentucky, Teleworks USA primarily serves rural and small communities, connecting individuals with companies based around the world. Over the nearly four years Teleworks USA has been in operation, more than 500 people have become employed in positions that allow them the freedom and flexibility to work from home.⁹ Telework jobs include positions that range

from entry-level customer service to highly skilled remote assistance, with an average entry-level salary around \$20,000.¹⁰ “These are real opportunities, coming in from the outside and generating a revenue source within the community,” says Tom Higgins, president of Teleworks USA. “But we need to adjust people’s way of thinking, making sure they know that these are legitimate, professional jobs.”¹¹

Teleworks USA generally works with community colleges and career training centers when connecting individuals with the telework positions. Not only are these ideal locations for telework training, they also offer a temporary workspace for those who need time to put together an effective work environment at home. Currently there are 12 companies that work with Teleworks USA on a consistent basis, though Higgins notes that there are always episodic needs from other companies as well. Teleworking offers employees the opportunities to diversify their experiences, and improve pay and benefits by seeking out other managerial positions within and outside the companies with whom they currently work.

“When people look out their front door, they don’t see a lot of opportunities,” says Higgins. “We’re charged to develop economic opportunities that allow people to work from home. Broadband Internet connection is a big advantage compared to those with dial-up Internet.”

Regional development organizations have also been on the forefront of planning for broadband. In 2009, with funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the State of Florida enlisted the Central Florida Regional Planning Council (CFRPC), the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council (SWFRPC), and the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council (TBRPC) to lead a project that would not only identify the necessities of planning broadband infrastructure, but also produce the documentation that would result in a planning toolkit and training manual. After running two local broadband pilot programs, the councils assembled the publications and have provided free access to these resources online at <http://www.cfrpc.org/programs/broadband/>. These resources are applicable for rural, suburban, and urban areas alike.

Topics in the Planning Toolkit include the process of engaging key stakeholders and decision makers, templates for website development, database templates and methodologies, and modeling techniques for identifying future broadband needs. The Training Manual walks readers through the step-by-step process of embarking

on a broadband development project. "When people understand the importance of broadband, they will find ways to overcome the challenges of providing access," says Eric Labbe, program manager at CFRPC.¹²

Preparing for Disasters

Disasters respect neither jurisdictional boundaries nor rural-urban distinctions, and the ability of communities and regions to prepare, respond, and recover from natural, manmade, and economic shocks is dependent on strong and sustained regional collaboration. Effective preparedness requires well-established networks, communication channels, joint training, pooled resources, and collaborative planning at the local, regional, state, and federal levels, and across public, private, and non-profit sectors. Emergency planning to ensure supplies of food, fuel, and energy, shelter, evacuation protocols and routes, communications, search and rescue, medical care, law enforcement, and so on has to involve all the communities within a region.

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www.hazardcenter.louisville.edu/champs. This web-based program allows municipalities to create their own community profile with a list of community assets, a module to assess their community capabilities for responding to potential disasters, a guided process to create and maintain planning policy documents, information regarding available funding opportunities, and a project management function that allows multiple users to update, track, and share information on different community projects.

CHR director Josh Human says that CHAMPS provides a level playing field for all communities in a region, despite their location or access to resources. "One of our main goals is to make it easier for rural communities to compete for funding and gather data," says Human.¹³ While

The Center for Hazards Research and Policy Development (CHR), located at the University of Louisville in Kentucky is able to assist all local communities of the Commonwealth – rural, urban, and suburban – with disaster planning services through its online portal, the Community Hazard Assessment and Mitigation Planning System (CHAMPS), available at [http://](http://www.hazardcenter.louisville.edu/champs)



The CHAMPS framework allows localities of all sizes to gather necessary data, properly plan for future hazards, and effectively compete for funding. Source: University of Louisville Center for Hazards Research and Policy Development

the first phase of CHAMPS was introduced in 2009, it wasn't until this past year that the Kentucky state government began to tie local disaster preparedness funds to participation in the online planning program. Encouraging every municipal government to create a profile and utilize the services allows local government leaders to identify what resources are available to be shared by municipalities throughout a region, encourages collaboration, and strengthens regional disaster preparedness.

"Our current goal is to train more individuals across the state to ensure their ability to access the tools within CHAMPS," says Human. Since 2012, CHR has trained over 400 people through in-person and webinar training sessions.

The inclusion of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in the online program facilitates more informed decision making in regards to disaster resilience preparations, allowing multiple layers of data to be evaluated at the same time. This portal not only provides communities with the ability to retain institutional and project history, but also allows a greater regional approach to disaster planning due to enhanced communication abilities between project stakeholders. Different community departments that once worked in silos are now able to collaborate on resilience efforts through the portal, increasing a community's ability to handle potential disasters.

Recovery and rebuilding after a disaster is greatly improved by planning and by mitigating economic, social, infrastructure, and environmental vulnerabilities. Actions to ensure business continuity, protect at-risk popu-

lations such as the elderly or the disabled, maintain vital infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and utilities, and avoid building on floodplains and exposed areas, all depend on urban-rural engagement and collaboration.

INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES

Transport to Jobs and Services

All rural residents want good access to jobs and essential services. Effective transit is particularly critical to the quality of life of rural youth, elderly, people with disabilities, and families with low incomes. 1.6 million rural residents do not have access to a car and 38 percent live where there is no public transport.¹⁴

Issues of accessibility, safety, transportation costs, quality of life, and economic development differ significantly across the country, so decisions on transportation priorities are best taken at the regional level to balance local needs with state and national priorities. Finding creative solutions that meet urban and rural transportation needs and foster rural-urban collaboration is increasingly a priority.

In the four counties that the Eastern Maine Development Corporation (EMDC) serves, most residents live in rural and sparsely populated areas. Public transportation is very limited throughout the region and most people live outside of walking distance of their place of employment. The largest metropolitan area, Bangor, serves as the greatest location of employment for the residents of Eastern Maine, most of whom commute by car. A growing elderly population, a steady number of

single commuters traveling approximately 25 minutes each direction every day for work, and rising gas prices led the EMDC to study the transportation needs of residents, which resulted in the report *Linking the Rural Regions of Four Counties in Maine to Enhance Transportation Opportunities and Improve Quality of Life*.¹⁵

Over the course of three years, researchers surveyed residents, talked with community organizations, and held focus groups, which led to the implementation of various recommendations including commuter bus routes to Bangor and the University of Maine and the development of additional shared-ride parking lots throughout the region. Furthermore, the Eastern Maine Transportation Management Association assumed the oversight of all transportation activities in the region beginning in spring 2014. These responsibilities include educating the public on ridesharing programs, implementing a website with information regarding public transportation, and serving as the connector of transportation issues for municipalities, employers, and businesses to advocate for more efficient transportation options for employees.

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The results of the study also led to the development of the *Getting There Maine* website (www.gettingtheremaine.com), a shared space that allows residents to connect with ridesharing opportunities through a databank of rides available within their community and rate their ride experiences. Vicki Rusbult, economic development coordinator at EMDC, says that the website's employer portal has received local, state and national attention, including the 2013 *NADO Excellence in Regional Transportation Award*. The employer portal is also one of the most popular sections of the site.

"The ride share board pages, employer portal, and community resources pages are logging the greatest number of visits," says Rusbult.¹⁶ Overall, the website has seen a three-fold increase in traffic over the course of the past year. This coordinated effort to ease the hurdles of traveling to larger metro centers in the region allows a greater number of individuals access to employment opportunities beyond their local community, supporting stronger regional economic development and workforce networks.



Downeast Transportation is one of several commuter bus service providers in Eastern Maine, providing an alternative transportation option for Hancock County residents who work in the neighboring city of Bangor. *Source: gettingtheremaine.com*

EXPANDING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Regional Food Systems

The rapid growth of farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture programs, and local sourcing by restaurants provides testament to the value placed on connecting urban consumers to locally-grown food. The interest in fostering local and regional food systems is at the intersection of a number of important public concerns:

- Generating jobs, income, and wealth in rural economies through local production and processing of food products;
- Improving food security and public health by having diverse food supply options, and easy access to healthy, nutritional, and affordable food;
- Promoting environmental sustainability through agricultural and ecological diversity and efforts to reduce pollution and waste associated with large scale production practices; and
- Enhancing community development and resilience through education on where food comes from, encouraging new generations of farmers, and bringing urban and rural communities together in a common cause.

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The lack of mid-sized farms and inadequate infrastructure to facilitate the transfer from local, mid-scale producers to consumers are all issues experienced throughout the country. Aggregation, processing, and distribution infrastructure is primarily targeted at large-scale production for commodities, and the lack of appropriate infrastructure to facilitate smaller, locally-sourced commodities in a "cost-effective, consistent and reliable scale" means that often distributors and wholesalers must import produce from outside the region.¹⁷

This has been especially challenging for the Sacramento, California region, which is considered to have the fourth largest agricultural economy in the world. While most of the 2.3 million residents of the region live in urban communities, 70 percent of the landscape is rural agriculture,



Many residents of Sacramento take advantage of the growing number of farmers' markets available, including this one on the Country Club Plaza Mall. *Source: Flickr user Robert Couse-Baker*

forest, or open space.¹⁸ Despite the proximity to locally grown food, it is estimated that only two percent of the 1.9 million tons of food consumed annually in the Sacramento region is locally grown.¹⁹

In 2007, the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) introduced the Rural-Urban Connections Strategy (RUCS). This effort is driven by a rural perspective on land use, agricultural infrastructure, economic opportunities, forest management, and government regulations, all in an effort to ensure economic and environmental sustainability. In response to the challenges experienced by local farmers and smaller production, stakeholders identified a need for greater regional agricultural infrastructure that would successfully link locally grown food to local markets. The result was the Sacramento Regional Food Hub Feasibility Analysis which included a business model to evaluate the financial viability of the food hub approach. David Shabazian, project manager at RUCS, said the Food Hub Feasibility Analysis is the first of its kind to include a business model. "The good news is that it shows profitability and looks like a worthwhile venture to go into," says Shabazian.²⁰

The analysis found that a for-profit food hub model was the most financially sustainable approach for the region, with an emphasis on developing direct market channels between producers and local institutions such as schools and hospitals, wholesalers, and distributors.²¹ The business model consisted of four stages, scaling up over the course of seven years as growth occurred. Plans include a 22,000 square foot facility with services that include

aggregation, sorting, packing, storing, packaging, processing, and distribution. Expanded services provide a greater number of smallholder local farmers the opportunity to tap into a growing market for locally harvested produce, something that has been a challenge thus far.

According to Shabazian, the two largest food banks in the region have both recently acquired large warehouses to expand operations and are considering the food hub business model to add functionality to their facilities. Larger community impacts are also expected as a result from the food hub analysis. "We have used the results to conduct case studies for counties interested in ways to take advantage of the local food market opportunities and we expect those case studies to inform policy and economic development decisions," says Shabazian.

CONCLUSION

To move forward, it would be helpful if there was a national statement of shared purpose along the lines that *if metropolitan America is to drive national prosperity, then to succeed it will need a healthy and sustainable rural economy and culture, and if rural America is to flourish, it will need vibrant, well-functioning cities and suburbs*. But in the absence of such a policy context, there are a number of ways in which productive rural-urban connections can be and are being pursued at the regional and local level.

This issue brief highlighted a few of these efforts underway in the areas of broadband development, disaster resilience, transportation, and food systems to support stronger, more prosperous regions. Recognizing that metropolitan and rural America are connected and interdependent is an important first step to converting regional assets into prosperity and opportunity for rural and urban communities alike.

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Endnotes:

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- ⁶ The term "regional development organization" refers to the multi-jurisdictional regional planning and development organizations that exist throughout the country and are known by various names in different states, including councils of government, regional councils, economic development districts, local development districts, and planning and development councils. These public-based entities play an invaluable role in fostering intergovernmental collaboration among federal, state, and local officials; deliver and manage federal and state programs; and work to solve area-wide issues and to address the fundamental building blocks required for competitive and sustainable communities and economies.
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- ¹⁰ Ibid.
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In May 2014, the NADO Research Foundation convened a workshop in Omaha, Nebraska to support SCI grantees develop plans and partnerships to bolster their communities' economic competitiveness and quality of life by engaging in place-based strategies that strengthen connections between cities and rural regions. A follow-up webinar was held in July 2014. All materials have been posted at www.nado.org. This issue brief is designed to expand upon the information presented at the workshop and webinar to provide regional and community development practitioners with a different framing of rural-urban relationships and additional ideas for implementation.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of HUD or ISC.

