
Overview Panel Comments

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Governance first must be about meeting the needs of people in the community. This conference has given each of us the opportunity to rethink how we become part of, as well as how we sustain such a dynamic process. This is the very essence of building our rural economy and gaining support or “buy-in” participation from our communities.

I would like to acknowledge, at this time, the effort and vision of the Center for the Study of Rural America and the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. Undertaking such an event requires untold hours of preparation and planning by many unsung heroes whose job it is to just make it happen.

We especially should recognize the vision that Mark Drabenstott and his staff have exemplified in choosing the topics and the presenters to synthesize the issues that present themselves when devising a solution for rural governance. I would like to use one of the comments Drabenstott made in the opening remarks on Monday morning, then perhaps we can all gain a greater perspective of the challenges facing rural America. I have used a phrase that “sometimes governing is like keeping frogs in a wheel barrow.” But I like Drabenstott’s analogy even better when he said, “This is something comparable to herding cats.” I like that because the intended direction of moving public policy and governance forward does not always coincide with our best efforts or even the wishes of those who are being moved (or herded, as in most instances of governance).

There are five elements that are reoccurring themes among all the presentations:

1. Constituency,
2. Champions,
3. Capacity,
4. Community, and
5. Compassion.

CONSTITUENCY

Our conference began with an overview by Joe Sertich and his experience in devising a strategy that had merit because his community deployed an Arrowhead model. This model built constituency through public and private partnerships, with higher education taking the initiative. Each side of the Arrowhead had a specific purpose, where each partner was given a task to accomplish that moved the community agenda forward.

Chuck Fluharty later emphasized the importance of a participatory form in developing rural governance—which is both dynamic and competitive between rural and urban economies. Given the scarcity of resources, in terms of both human and monetary capital, perhaps this single element in the development of a true constituent base should be real and apparent to us all.

Karl Stauber noted that a true constituency base is built upon a foundation of “what we know; what we believe; and what we want to do.” Constituencies emerge in a multidimensional paradigm that exists in a geospatial concept and includes the needs of people and their desires to prosper and enjoy a quality of life within a given region.

In reading the list of attendees at our conference, representatives from multiple entities of rural America can be noted. Throughout this country, local councils of government or area development districts (ADDs)—such as the ADD in my hometown, Green River Area Development District—work with both the public and private sector to build a constituency. The seven-county consortium is composed of elected officials and community leaders, who collectively define and then move our agenda forward for the betterment of our region, without regard to personal or geopolitical agendas. In the commonwealth of Kentucky, this is replicated 15 times through our ADDs.

CHAMPIONS

Who are the champions in your community? This question was asked or implied numerous times during our conference. Whether they are the national affiliates, such as National Association of Regional Councils (NARC), National Association of Development Organizations (NADO), National Association of Counties (NACO), Northwest Association of Accredited Schools and Colleges (NASC), or others promoting and collectively working for their constituents as noted above, they are nonetheless “Bold, tenacious, and always ready to push the envelope,” according to Pike Powers in his presentation of a working model in Austin, Texas. These organizations are about the people who assume leadership roles and become the decisionmakers or the “public entrepreneurs,” who takes the risk for the community at large. Rural governance requires champions. Reinventing public and private institutions compels these champions to take the risks and consequences, even

if it means losing a vote from a constituent or an election. They are about putting community before themselves, even when the community is pondering which direction to take or whether to change at all. These champions are ethical; they are bound by regulations and order; and they become the true “brokers” of the new rural economy they envision.

CAPACITY

Rural communities must build financial capital or wealth; invest in the stock of professional scholars or visionaries; create space for the anticipated new development or the place where the exchange of ideas may occur; and recognize that knowledge-based economies are how rural America now must sustain themselves in a global market. Jischke challenged us to work toward such a goal—something Purdue University has been successful at doing. Rural communities are driven by strong economies that are, in fact, the engines that often must adjust to the loss and outmigration of venture capitalists, professional and academic individuals, and the general workforce.

When I took office as McLean county judge and executive in 1994, our county had the third highest unemployment rate in the commonwealth of Kentucky at more than 16.5 percent. What we were experiencing was not uncommon within that region of western Kentucky. We are a collection of agrarian communities within the fertile bottom lands of the Ohio and Green rivers—the breadbasket of Kentucky. However, we were “shipping” more of our youth (the future of our communities) out of the region than we were bushels of corn and soybeans. This scenario had gone unchecked for nearly a decade. That had to be replaced with a reinvented solution to public policy issues.

Today, more than 3,000 new jobs have been created in just over eight years in ongoing construction, management, and the general workforce. Our community and technical schools are partnering with local governments and the use of tax incen-

tives to retrain displaced workers in agriculture and coal mining.

Technology now is becoming the cornerstone of all public policy—from broadband, telecommunication advantages, robotics, and experimental pharmaceutical facilities for transferring the capacity of land and personal expertise (what once was dedicated to tobacco production) to the knowledge and production of manufactured enzymes for cancer research. Gov. Ernie Fletcher made a commitment to technology when he addressed the Kentucky General Assembly during his state of the commonwealth address earlier this year. He insisted on legislation and funding for technology, including rural broadband, in order to grow Kentucky's economy and work toward the quality of life we all desire. He succeeded when members from both political parties and from geographic regions (with caucuses that represent rural and urban communities across our diverse state) agreed to move his agenda forward. Capacity, which was derived from a constituency and at the willingness of champions in the legislature, is yet another example of new governance in Kentucky. This was echoed from our presenters.

COMMUNITY

Our presenters emphasized the theme “A sense of place” when they described their communities. A close friend shared his personal “sense of place” when he learned I was going to be in Kansas City, Mo. His grandparents operated what was once well-known as “Adam’s Dairy.” This facility was in the community near Blue Springs, Mo., east of Kansas City, and it was one of the first to use stainless steel in its dairy operations. Growing up on a farm gives a person a value that only rural Americans can appreciate and pass on to their children. Those values learned in rural America are what shape our work ethic to honor and give back more than we take.

A sense of community arises from those memories of the hard work, joy of family, reward of finishing a

task, setting goals, and more importantly, the desire to preserve that sense of place for future generations. We think of these places across the landscape of rural America as crossroads (e.g., Guffie, Parson’s Corner, Ozark, Buel, or Possum Trot). These places are direction signs to where our visions and public policies should best be redirected. Otherwise, they will be only memories, such as Adam’s Dairy and Guffie, Ky.

I have never been fishing in the Northwest, but after listening to several of the presenters from there, I want to go fishing. I remember the excitement of standing on the 45th parallel in northeast Minnesota and text messaging my daughter that I was “half way to the north pole.” Later I drove along the shoreline of Lake Superior in Minnesota and witnessed the feeling of many of the communities—that real “sense of place.” In each one, the people made them so interesting and made each feel like home.

Our communities can become the excitement of where main streets resonate with the renaissance of rural downtowns and the expectation that rural America can and should be prosperous. Government should be participatory, and the needs of the people come before our own.

COMPASSION

No community in rural America could prosper without the influence and influx of nonprofits and volunteers. Lead by example, and never forget, as policymakers or community leaders, that constituents have real beliefs, desires, and fears. Hard, physical infrastructure is rather cold in its sense of place. The analysis of break-even, cost-benefit ratios too often are used as the determining factors in rural communities, such as the bypass in Mississippi that Clinton Bristow mentioned during his presentation.

The inclusion of people with real beliefs, anticipations, and needs often becomes the responsibility of nongovernmental entities. Local and state governments have trended toward putting down asphalt and

building concrete bridges, instead of building up the character of the people who give rural America its sole purpose. Taxation is necessary and not evil if the people are allowed to ask what their money should be spent on. Food, shelter, emergency services, public protection, health care, day care, preschool and elementary education, and the preservation of open spaces or heritage corridors are building blocks, not just for communities, but for the people in the community. Our presenters have repeatedly emphasized this, and it perhaps has become the overriding theme of the conference. New governance for a new rural economy begins with the people.

Where there is no governance, there can be no sense of place, and rural America quickly loses its identity and takes on the nature and characteristics of urban cultures. My grandfather taught me that if I was ever to know where I was heading that I must not ever forget where I had come from. He also said to always remember those who were there to help guide me along the way. Compassion is the element easily overlooked or not addressed at all in public policy. It is what sets rural America apart and has inspired each of those who have stood at this podium during our conference.

The task of nonprofit organizations and the volunteers, who “stand the gap” when our vision is more grandiose than either our budgets or tax base can afford, is to become our compass rose. Human services must never be outvoted at a county court or city hall meeting. Regardless of how passionate or beneficial our strategy, it all comes down to a vote by some legislative body in a county courthouse or city hall in rural America.

We must work with units of local governments for new governance to rebuild our rural economies and communities. I will close with a quote by Daniel Burnham, a famous architect, which is engraved on a wall at Union Station in Washington, D.C.: “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood.”