

DIVERSITY OF RURAL PLACES—TEXAS

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Government is like a big baby that never grows up! This is a truth that can be demonstrated by this simple statement: “When government is bad, we expect it to change itself.” Not only is this statement ludicrous, but it disobeys the Second Law of Thermodynamics which, put simply, states that any system left to itself will always move from a state of order to a state of disorder. As a pragmatic optimist, I can safely say the federal government is hopeless. State governments are also hopeless on a smaller scale, but you can still change local government. It still responds to the squeaky wheel.

The only thing worse than an armchair quarterback is an armchair expert on government, big business, education, or any other social or political dilemma. In solving the problems of rural areas there is no room for those who want to sit around debating and analyzing those problems. There is only one solution. Look on the up side, not the down side, and start where you are. The independent nature of rural people will prevent rural communities from ever uniting to become a single special interest group. Therefore, some local person or group must take the initiative to work together to start somewhere. Community leaders must recognize that the futures of rural business and agriculture are intertwined. Challenges, such as providing effective rural education and adequate health care delivery in rural areas, must be addressed collectively even when in conflict with the generally independent nature of rural people.

The town of Dalhart, Texas, began addressing these issues in 1988 through a series of public meetings held with the help of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service and a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. We soon established what the most critical rural development policy issues were and developed economic growth strategies in response. Since no single town or local entity could financially support any approach on a grand scale, we had to look at our “economic geography.”

Governmental units formed a century or more ago need the perspective of economic geography, the essence of community development and strategic planning. Dalhart sits astride the boundary of Dallam and Hartley counties. Dallam County is located in the northwest corner of the Texas panhandle, bordering New Mexico and Oklahoma and less than fifty miles from Colorado and Kansas. The number one priority was to take control of economic geography by

improving local governmental efficiency. To do so required working together through joint planning meetings and avoiding "turf" battles.

Since that first public meeting in 1988, Dalhart has acquired a 2,000-bed prison facility that will open in January, 1995. The prison farm donated by local governmental entities, will raise enough pinto beans to feed the entire prison population of Texas. Also, Premium Standard Farms (PSF) of Texas is expanding a 300,000-head hog facility in Dallam County to process 7,000 hogs per day. PSF will perform all aspects of the process including marketing the packaged product. More than 1,000 new jobs will be created in the two-county area of less than 10,000 population. A downtown movie theater was restored to become a community dinner theater and another abandoned downtown building was restored to become a community youth center. An old downtown church was converted into a senior citizen center. The local silted-in lake has been designated a state waterfowl refuge.

Growing pains have created new problems such as housing and increased demands for new infrastructure. Dallam County is the Texas county furthest from the capital Austin. In fact, it is closer to five other state capitals than Austin. Thus, our economic geography includes the corners of five states that are learning to cooperate economically. It also creates tremendous opportunities for food stamp fraud. Along with our Texas pride comes a Texas prejudice against those north of the state line and those south of the border. This causes closed communities that are resistant to people moving in to fill the newly created jobs. These adversities can become stumbling blocks to economic development, or they can be sources of energy and movement to cooperate and form creative solutions.

In our 3,000-square-mile, two-county area with a population of 9,000, five school districts, four towns, two hospital districts, two water districts, five fire departments, three law enforcement agencies, and numerous duplicated services, each of these entities is represented in quarterly meetings held to discuss problems and joint solutions. Both county commissioners' courts meet together monthly. Annually, interested community leaders meet in a constructive forum to define problems and assign task groups to address them. If we cannot define what we want, we define what we do not want. Goals are set and key leadership positions are appointed. Although consolidation of various entities has been suggested, it is too emotional an issue. Working together is paramount.

In the 1990s the successful person has arrived. He wants to play golf and enjoy the American dream. His recreation is designed to keep him busy and out of trouble. He expects the low achiever to work more, to stay busy and out of trouble. Conversely, the low achiever thinks the government and the successful owe him a living and a high standard of recreation. To him this is the American dream. Welfare and greed continue to perpetuate these myths.

Rural America does not need to become a welfare state. Many rural communities are dying, but some are succeeding where others have failed. To one, diversity becomes a stimulus to organize. To the other, diversity suffocates economic development. To one, adversity becomes a source of energy to continue progress. To the other, adversity becomes an insurmountable hurdle.

Rural America must continue to provide food and fiber for our nation and, more specifically, the conservative, common-sense leaders our nation so desperately needs. America was settled by castaways who had nothing but a dream. Rural communities are the castaways of today and, while holding some 90 percent of the nation's natural resources, they can still realize the true American dream if they organize around the diversity of their economic geography.