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Rural Renaissance or Death Throes?

ULTIMATELY, RURAL ADVOCATES ARE KEY

BY CHARLES W. FLUHARTY, M.Div.

Rural communities matter to America, and today I'd like to discuss the economic, social, political, and policy contexts for considering "community" in a rural dimension, in relation to what The Brookings Institution characterizes as "The Metropolitan Nation," and, finally, from a National Rural Health Association (NRHA) organizational standpoint.

Then, I would like to frame these considerations within a larger rural dynamic, what I would call "the great rural renaissance." We are, indeed, either on the cusp of a great rural reawakening, or in the final death throes of the rural agrarian vision. This is the ultimate tipping point for rural America, and I shall argue that the positive alternative remains possible, but only if rural advocates unite across sectors to achieve that outcome.

In closing, I'll offer some thoughts on the role NRHA can, and should, play in the ensuing national dialogue regarding these possibilities.

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

I thought it might be well, so as to validate my voice and vision, to share what is in my heart, and what has formed it. For this is all deeply grounded in community.

I grew up on a small farm in Appalachian Ohio and had a blessed upbringing. Our family was quite wealthy, in actuality, as I came to learn over the course of my life; just not by material standards. Smithfield, Ohio, was a mining and farming community — diverse, inclusive, caring and creative, a truly special place. I was raised on a small dairy farm and had an uneventful farming childhood until the 11th year of my life, when three critical events occurred which forever formed my path. Three epiphanies, in one year — how special!

In the spring of that year, after my grandfather had plowed the family garden plot with our team, Kate and George, he moved beyond the apple orchard where the garden was located, stopped the team, and called me over. He said, "Butchie, (how's that for a nickname!) take 'em on out toward the

Kithcart place, and bring 'em back — let's get this cornfield opened up."

This, of course, was the highlight of my young life until that time. I was being

initiated into the fellowship of the soil and had longed for this moment. Until then, I had worked the horses behind my grandfather on his lap but had never done so alone. Naturally, Kate and George knew about all this and could have plowed this field in their sleep. However, I didn't know that back then, and this represented both my most monumental challenge and my greatest farming opportunity. Without a doubt, that day I was responsible for the most crooked furrow ever plowed on the Foster Farm, but it looked perfect to me.

After we had gone out and come back, my grandfather thanked me for "openin' it up," and took over again, and I sat down under a huge old apple tree, in the full blossom of that Appalachian spring, to savor the moment. I watched him take the horses out again to the west, in hindsight repairing my



damage. As I sat there, I looked to the east, past our orchard, across the valley, up above our woods, to the village. At that point, I had an overwhelming realization that my life was perfect. I knew and loved my place, my role on the farm and my future possibilities. I realized how truly blessed I was. This feeling was palpable, and I shall never forget that inner joy.

Later that summer I left home for the first time, to spend a week at a Boy Scout camp on a lake in eastern Ohio. All went quite well there for a few days, and I was adjusting to being away from my home community and family, until, during a handicraft session, one of the Eagle Scouts leading session looked at me and said “that’s the ugliest birthmark I have ever seen!” Now, that was tough, and I left shortly thereafter, quietly stealing away to return to my tent. After a while, I realized this was so troubling because it had never occurred before. I had never needed to deal with it. Clearly, I had always looked this way. But, until then, no one had ever mentioned it, because it hadn’t mattered to them.

As I reflected upon this, I realized how very important family and community are in forming our sense of self and the world, either for good or ill. My community had nurtured me well.

Later that fall, as I came home one day on the school bus, I noticed that our fences were torn down and our cows were out. I soon learned why. Early that morning, the coal company had come

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onto our land with bulldozers and began to mine what had been, until then, a pristine hillside valley. As my family discussed this with me, I learned that years before, a prior owner had signed away forever the surface rights to our

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farm, for a pittance, via the Broad Form Deed, a common Appalachian tragedy. Over the next six months, I lay in bed each night and listened to the coal shovel destroying the hollows of our farm.

My lifelong commitment to social and economic justice began as I lay in the bedroom of that farmhouse each night, listening to our farm being destroyed. That is also when my commitment to public policy was birthed. I learned three valuable lessons in my 11th year — community truly matters, forces beyond community influence its ultimate destiny and public policy can affect these two realities for the good. And, so, my approach to this “community” consideration is framed from my place, to which I will return next week to again plow the same garden plot my grandfather and I plowed in my 11th year.

I am choosing to skirt the subtle nuances and effete intellectual considerations of the “community” question today. I am choosing to set aside sociology, cultural and social anthropology, social philosophy and archeology today . . .

And call on [poet, author and farmer] Wendell Berry.

On October 14, 2009, he was interviewed at the Wisconsin Book Fair, and asked by the moderator about newly emerging forms of community, digital communities, etc., “Are these credible forms of community?”

Wendell responded, “We are flooded with language, but we must be very careful. All I ask is that you recognize

you’re using a metaphor.” And then he added, “[conservationist] Aldo Leopold said it best: ‘A community is the people and the place and everything else that’s in it.’”

As Wendell has said elsewhere, “What I stand for is what I stand on. . . . The past is our definition. We may strive, with good reason, to escape it, or to escape what is bad in it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it. . . . A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.”

So that definition of community will be my referent for the rest of my thoughts — *communitas* — gifts together.

THE CHALLENGE IN COMMUNITY

Having identified this framework for community, we next must address the “rural” challenge in the “rural community” consideration. A few quick groundings are in order:

- All rural communities are not agriculturally based. In fact, most are not.
- All rural communities are not suffering. Many are, but many are not.
- However, most of our nation’s persistent poverty counties are rural, and in most disadvantaged rural communities, the indicators of need are equal to or greater than those experienced in our central cities.
- Some rural communities will be most sustainable if “developed” from an economic standpoint, not much further.
- Many rural communities are in metropolitan areas.

Let’s explore these dynamics briefly. U.S. definitions of rural are impre-



cise. Office of Management and Budget designations of Core Based Statistical Areas are based on urban centers and the commuting relationship with those centers. “Metropolitan” does not equate with “urban,” and “nonmetropolitan” does not equate with “rural.” In fact, given these definitions, 51 percent of rural people live in metropolitan counties. Thus, precise definitions of rural and urban never work well for policy targeting, as you know.

While “rural” is generally regarded as the appropriate construct for policy targeting nonmetropolitan communities in the U.S., we are unclear as to what “rural” truly is. There are many different perspectives. For some, “rural” is an idealized perception, typology or memory, real or imagined. For others, it is what is not “something else” — urban or metropolitan. For some, it is described as a state of mind, or psycho-social identity. And for others, a cultural, ethnic, geographical or class identity.

In practice, from a policy standpoint, “rural” is a non-specific, changeable and imprecise composite of a discrete set of variables, differing across federal and state policy and programs and time, which is used to target specific funding sources. This is not a policy goal, this is an administrative construct. The question of what is “rural” deflects attention from the deeper lack of a stated policy goal for federal investments in nonmetropolitan geographies. In Europe, there is a strong public policy commitment to a “Livable Countryside.” That “Livable Countryside” construct in Europe, which includes small urban centers, rural communities, small villages, farms and natural resource areas, seeks to provide such a consensus vision, through the principles which underlie the construct. Until recently, no such approach was possible here. But the Obama administration has provided a new possibility.

“PLACE-BASED” POLICY AGENDA

This emanates from the Obama administration’s “Place-Based” policy agenda; the emerging Livable Communities

BY THE NUMBERS

Most “rural” states account for under 7 percent of the rural population

Five states that usually are viewed as urban account for over 25 percent of our nation’s rural people:

3.6	TEXAS
million	
3.2	NORTH CAROLINA
million	
2.8	PENNSYLVANIA
million	
2.5	OHIO
million	
2.5	MICHIGAN
million	

Nonmetropolitan America includes many urban centers. Sixty percent of nonmetropolitan residents live in micropolitan areas, which include a regional center of 10,000 to 49,999 people.

Partnership between the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, Commerce and the Environmental Protection Agency; the “Livable Cities” movement; and The Brookings Institution’s Metropolitan Policy Center agenda.

Unfortunately, these efforts were primarily designed to create innovative urban policy approaches. While rural was alluded to in framework language, this was a decidedly urban agenda. This is ironic because rural policy scholars have argued for a place-based domestic policy agenda for the last half-century. As many of you know, social welfare policy has long contained a tension between investments in people or in places. While many of us felt this was always a false dichotomy, since

community and culture are inextricably linked to individual and family decisions, it did hold sway for some time, as place investments were felt to simply institutionalize poverty. This was a decidedly urban perspective. In other nations, place-based investments have long been viewed as the ideal framework in which to integrate federal commitments to rural geographies.

All this is currently being stood on its head by the Obama administration. The White House released a significant Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies on August 11, 2009, creating a new framework for place-based policies, beginning with the fiscal year 2011 federal budget. This guidance memorandum outlined new policy principles to advance the administration’s domestic and fiscal priorities, and to increase the impact of federal funding by leveraging place-conscious and place-based programming. This first public acknowledgement was presaged by significant developmental work on the part of Brookings’ Metropolitan Policy Center over the last two years. However, beyond this point, there are dragons: If place-based policy is to be the administration’s new domestic policy framework, how does the small urban, rural community and countryside fare? Will this ultimately be only a metropolitan agenda?

This White House memo asked for specific actions from each federal department, including the identification of three to five major programs designed to address the principles of place policy, which include:

- Clear, measurable, and carefully evaluated goals that guide investment and regulation in economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability, community health and access to opportunity, safety and security

- An acknowledgement that change occurs through the community level and often through partnership, and that complex problems require flexible, integrated solutions

- An acknowledgement that many

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important challenges demand regional approaches

Since that time, all federal departments have begun framing new program design in response to this White House directive, and competitive federal and state programs have been developed to give incentives to regional innovation efforts.

Unfortunately, a place-based policy framework which focuses solely on metropolitan geography masks a number of critical realities. First of all, metropolitan areas do account for over 80 percent of our total population and much of our nation's economic activity. However, they account for only 25 percent of our nation's land mass, while most of our nation's food, energy and natural resource activities occur beyond metropolitan borders. Consequently, a metropolitan focus for place-

based investments ignores critical linkages with three-quarters of our U.S. natural resource base and the 20 percent of the population which stewards those national treasures.

Advocates for this place-based policy are currently engaged in a recalibration to better ensure attention to the actual rural-urban continuum in all regional innovation practices. I remain hopeful that this rethinking will result in meaningful attention to the unique rural contributions to our nation's metropolitan areas, including the air we breathe, the food we eat, the natural resources that sustain both and the cultural heritage and environmental assets that frame the basis for much of urban America's recreational and cultural pursuits.

This is a deeper question: Can rural America participate in this place-based policy awakening, and are we in the midst of an emerging great rural renaissance?

THE GREAT RURAL RENAISSANCE

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to rural people and places, over time, if we can but capture and actualize it.

Building a new commitment to rural America via a federal place-based approach offers huge opportunities. However, achieving this regional rural innovation framework will demand:

- Greater attention to asset-based development, much more broadly defined

- The building of regional frameworks, appropriately configured, and of sufficient scale to leverage these geographies and bridge these constituencies (While we need rural and urban regional responses, their intersection is the future of enlightened place-based policy.)

- Greater attention to new governance/new intermediary support by the new public sector

- Regional innovation policies that specifically target mutually beneficial competitive advantage which rural and urban areas share (i.e., regional food systems, bio-energy compacts, natural resource-based/sustainability assets, "work-shed"/"water-shed" approaches/etc.)

- Attention to the importance of working landscapes through arts/heritage/culture; natural resources/tourism; and bio-energy, bio-fuels and entrepreneurial agriculture

SIGNS OF A NEW RURAL RENAISSANCE

- A new societal concern for natural resource stewardship
- New commitments to bio-energy and renewable energy
- The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act [federal stimulus act] rural broadband deployment
- The slow, community and regional foods movements, or, more precisely, the fact that California and New York now care a great deal about where their food comes from
- The emerging intergenerational wealth transfer which will occur over the next 20 years, and the psychic link boomers raised in rural America feel toward their communities of childhood
- The amazing wealth/equity that resides in the rural countryside, 90 percent debt-free
- The tremendous entrepreneurship culture within our nation's rural immigrant communities
- The strong leadership of rural women in all sectors
- Two Cabinet secretaries — U.S. Department of Agriculture's Tom Vilsack and Health and Human Services' Kathleen Sebelius — are former rural governors. Vilsack has a new vision for regional rural innovation, as well
- Rural seniority still controls the purse strings of many Congressional appropriations committees, where urban "Livable Communities" programs must find their federal funding
- National organizations such as NRHA, which are truly united and engaged in seeking a national rural regional innovation framework
- Health care reform, which will enable the rural uninsured to gain access to quality, affordable health care



- Incentives to bridge innovation/entrepreneurship support systems across the urban-rural continuum

- Opportunities to address spatial mismatch issues in workforce/training across broader geographies, via “place-based” community/technical college collaborations to both sister schools and research universities

- Innovative funding approaches which enhance collaboration across state and local governments, particularly in cross-sectoral, regional experimentation

- Continuing commitments to rural infrastructure deployment, including but not limited to broadband

As if all this were not daunting enough, there are a deeper set of critical institutional challenges facing each sector in rural America. Frankly, the rural health sector, with great thanks to NRHA, is in the forefront of this renaissance. However, if rural America is to participate in this regional innovation framework, we must rethink core missions; redefine roles and responsibilities; create a renaissance leadership cadre who become change agents; engage and support the “border crossers”; and redefine “we” and “they,” with special attention to diversity, cultural, and social inclusion.

In a rural setting, these innovations will often require investments in new intermediaries, which become more critical than ever. This recession and the lagging rural economic recovery will be particularly challenging next year, when federal stimulus funds are depleted. State and local governments are already operating under historic budget deficits, which most believe will exacerbate before they decline in rural America. At the same time, safety-net funding is also challenged as local and state revenues decline and human services needs expand exponentially. Finally, the comity within our public discourse and the tempering center of our body politic both continue to erode. Rural organizations such as NRHA, whose members are the leaders who

drive rural America, need to support these new approaches in a meaningful and committed manner.

THE NRHA CHALLENGE

Finally, what of this “community” — NRHA? What should NRHA be doing to specifically support such a rural renaissance? NRHA has long been acknowledged as a rural organizational leader. While you will be tremendously challenged by the sectoral demands of health reform, I would argue that the rural health community must lead the

While you will be tremendously challenged by the sectoral demands of health reform, I would argue that the rural health community must lead the nation in addressing these new rural realities.

nation in addressing these new rural realities. If you agree with my assessment, the poet Goethe addresses your situation well:

*It is not enough to know,
One should also use;
It is not enough to want,
One should also act.*

These are powerful words of institutional challenge. The rural health sector represents the broad leadership cadre of most rural communities. Urban America is very well positioned to assume the leadership mantle for the federal place-based policy agenda. Organizations such as NRHA must assume responsibility for assuring that rural people and communities are also equitably advantaged. This is especially true given the continuing challenges of the most disadvantaged among our rural citizens. We simply do not have the luxury of picking a less difficult time; the time is now.

Charles Darwin once observed, “If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin.” As Surgeon General C. Everett Koop challenged NRHA 20 years ago, I ask a similar question: Is one of our nation’s leading rural organizations doing all it can to lead a “com-

munity of the committed,” despite all you must deal with in the reform of your sector at this time, to ensure rural America is not left behind by the metropolitan place-based focus?

Well, that is a daunting question and challenge.

It is my belief that all of you, who have done so very much to build the political power of this association’s entities and thereby their viability and sustainability economically, are also called upon today to offer that very same commitment for a renewed rural

policy leadership, through and beyond your sector, to achieve a “rural health” across the American landscape. As the Surgeon General challenged 20 years ago, “Your continuing leadership task is to formulate and reformulate a collective vision for the health of rural America.”

As Emerson once observed, “What lies behind us, and what lies before us, are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.” You are a wonderful community. NRHA has a phenomenal history of service to rural America. However, I would argue your greatest moment may be before you. I look forward to working with you to ensure that regional rural innovation becomes central to our nation’s new U.S. place-based policy.

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