

Kansas Rural Center 2020 Town Hall
Rural Revitalization
By Rick McNary

The Kansas Rural Center, in their ongoing mission to strengthen small and family farms and their rural communities for rural revitalization, hosted the second of four virtual Town Hall meetings for 2020. Adapting to the limitations of public gatherings because of the pandemic, on-line presenters and participants joined Lt. Governor Lynn Rogers whose Office of Rural Prosperity has made these priorities an area of focus.

At one time in our nation's past, more than 98 percent of the population were connected to agriculture and were considered rural. However, those numbers are now reversed as only two percent of the population run the family farms in America. Surprisingly, 97 percent of farms in America are still family owned.

This divide between rural and urban is further illuminated in the population shift as now more than 80 percent of our citizens live in urban areas and less than 20 per cent live in rural areas.

For many in rural areas and the small cities which once served as a thriving hub for a community, window shopping on Main Street is replaced with impersonal plywood coverings and No Trespassing signs. Food deserts are created as grocery store owners close up shop, restaurants replace billboards of daily specials with For Sale signs by the local realtor. When those two businesses leave a small town, it's like the last box car full of community life trundles slowly down the track into the sunset taking hope along with it.

However, as Lt. Rogers pointed out, "When rural Kansas succeeds, urban succeeds," Rogers said. "A one percent increase in income for rural Kansas helps urban income increase by a half of one percent. It's important to remind urban neighbors that their success is dependent on their rural neighbors."

Although that urban/rural divide has slowly increased, there is a shift now of a younger generation wanting to either return to, or start afresh, living in rural America. Weary of urban dwelling, this younger population brings along their tech savvy skills plus a new way of looking at agriculture. Even the younger generations of farm families have an entrepreneurial attitude of approaching economic sustainability.

Many of them, fourth, fifth or even sixth generation farmers, seek a new way of economic sustainability that does not require the acquisition of more land or bigger equipment. They take seriously their role in successive generations and look for ways to not only sustain but prosper their farms. Perhaps it is this generation who best fills the vision of the Kansas Rural Center to *create a future of thriving family farms, revitalized communities, a clean environment, a healthy local and regional food system, and viable livelihoods for farmers, including opportunities for the next generation who will grow our food.*

Town Hall Participants

As participants signed up for the Town Hall, they were asked the simple question:

What does rural revitalization mean for you and your community?

The varied responses held two common themes; a sense of community and economic prosperity. Those two are inextricably tied together.

In the previous Town Hall, which focused on Local Food Systems, it appears a spark of hope for rural revitalization is taking place as urban dwellers, upon seeing the grocery store shelves empty, turned to the rural community for their food supply. Suddenly, urban dwellers began to purchase meat, produce, dairy and other farm-raised products directly from the farmers.

This new opportunity also highlighted a critical, missing link in rural revitalization. Internet and cell phone connectivity. As consumers searched online for farmers who sold directly, they also wanted to do financial transactions and ordering online. Many farmers and ranchers, unaccustomed and too busy to make a sudden shift, found their sales could have been more had they had the digital acumen and the broadband to conduct business.

Panelists

This Town Hall was moderated by writer Sarah Green and included the following presenters:

Lt. Gov. Lynn Rogers - Lt. Gov. Rogers grew up on a family farm in Kansas with 400 hogs, then spent his professional career in banking, specifically in agricultural financing. The office of the Lt. Governor has been specifically commissioned by Governor Laura Kelly with the Office of Rural Prosperity which focuses on housing, broadband, healthcare and childcare.

Andi Dale, of Dale Family Farms, is from Protection, in SW Kansas. She began teaching 25 years ago and has seen the enrollment dwindle to a total of 300 students in K-12. Slowly, they have moved their farm and ranch from conventional to regenerative types of farming and have added pork, turkey and chickens to their revenue stream. An hour's drive from a Wal-Mart or a fast food place, they find themselves self-reliant on the products they grow. After numerous attempts of individuals to keep a grocery store open in town, the community banded together and purchased shares.

Kendall Carswell grew up in Alton in Osborne county and saw the difficulties facing rural America and wanted to leave for better opportunities. His studies landed him back in Hays as a professor of social work at Fort Hays State University, then on to working in social services through hospital industries in rural Kansas. He spends much of his time working with refugee populations in Western Kansas.

Matt O'Malley is the Community Liaison for Livewell of Crawford county, in SE Kansas. Their mission is to make healthy choices the easy choice in Crawford county to improve the well-

being of residents and visitors of all ages and backgrounds. Livewell began through the Kansas Health Foundation which promotes healthy lifestyles through education, motivation, and support for all generations.

Ben Whiteside, of Butler Rural Electric, grew up on a farm around the El Dorado area, a farm now leased out to others. His work at Butler Rural has focused on finance, rate structures, solar farms and broadband deployment. He has served on the local school board for 24 years.

Panel Takeaways

The panel session began with this question:

What is more important now than ever as we think about rural communities for now and the future?

Andi Dale – Dale lives in a county of less than 2,000 people and finds that when things get harder, people get stuck in nostalgia, longing for the way things used to be. People are not comfortable with change but have to be able to imagine and look forward rather than at what they remember. In order to address the changes, people need to find ways to unify and identify the things that need to be change and come up with solutions.

Kendall Carswell works with refugees from various countries in SW Kansas who want a sense of belonging. Since many are employed in meat packing plants where Covid-19 outbreaks are the most prolific, many are afraid to go to work. These isolated people, along with the elderly population who now feel even more isolated, need new ways we can reach out to them to know we care for them and to engage them in civic life.

Lt Gov Rogers has held numerous conversations across the state about rural prosperity. Affordable housing, good paying jobs and childcare are major issues, all of which started long before Covid-19. As the number of business in small towns close, the overall mood is that of uncertainty. Yet, he sees communities coming together, as a community, to solve their challenges.

Matt O'Malley knows that it is important that food stays in the small communities. As grocery stores close and are being replaced by gas stations and dollar stores, it is important to experiment with new things. We might try ten new things and fail at nine, but we've been successful at one thing, so we build on that. McCune has come together to build a high tunnel with great success.

Ben Whiteside believes there is not only a question of, "how do we keep people in rural areas, but how do we attract them there?" There are several people who would love to build in rural areas, but they have internet-based businesses so they can't move their for lack of broadband. Broadband is the rural electrification of our generations.

What is the role of communities and what do we need communities to do?

Lt. Gov. Rogers - There are three big things for any community to survive; good paying jobs, the ability to raise a family and quality of life issues. Focusing on these three bring people together for the common good. One of the challenges in community is that those who have been working on the issues have been working on them a long time and they're tired. Often, they don't want to let go so we need to know how to transition that. We have to make sure the younger generation understands that we are appreciating them and help them.

Kendall Carswell - Our communities miss breaking bread together, sitting down at potlucks and the local cafe, chatting around the dinner table and being a part of each other. In Lakin, they partnered SW rural families with families in the refugee community with great success.

We are the content experts and know historically what needs to happen in these communities, but it must be the people in those towns that live it out each day that find their solutions. We need to find that trusted person and invest in them and ask them to gather the local change makers.

Ben Whiteside - It's important that communities understand they have to work together to grow stronger. He used an example of their school district needing a middle school but competing towns who wanted in their town managed to vote down any passage of a bond. Yet, when they did and found common ground, they realized it was best for the overall community.

Matt O'Malley - Affordable and quality housing is a real need in these smaller communities. Even though the cost of living otherwise might be less, housing is often higher making it difficult for people to make ends meet.

How do we get communities together?

- Meals have always been that which brings people together, but the pandemic has made that impossible.
- Community gardens - height of victory gardens during WWII, 40% of our food came from local gardens.
- After WWII, mass food production gave us more time to be with each other, but then came the food manufacturing of unhealthy foods.
- Sporting events have galvanized a community as they rally around their teams.
- Projects in the community help to bring people together
- Communities need to plan with steps, a, b, and c

Summary

Hope flickers more brightly for rural Kansas as a younger generation chooses to live, and work, in rural settings. New forms of commerce in direct-to-consumer sales from farms and ranches to the public highlighted the ability for unique business models. An elevated focus on internet

and cell phone coverage as key parts of infrastructure as well as new ways for communities to connect in person and online, provides the basis of finding new solutions.

SWOT Analysis for Rural Revitalization

Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urban success depends on rural success • A sense of community is much stronger in rural areas. • Stronger support systems as communities strive to take care of their own. • Direct-to-consumer sales resulting from empty grocery store shelves highlighted new business opportunities and revenue streams for struggling farmers.
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food deserts created as rural grocery stores close. • Many farms and ranchers unaccustomed to selling direct to the public and those who quickly adapted to online sales profited the most. • Covid-19 has eliminated the things that used to bring people together such as meals, sporting events and projects. • Broadband is weak or nonexistent. 185,000 tests for cell phone reception in rural areas, 65% of the tests failed. Because they proved that, the feds will now grant money for support. • A lot of ag equipment requires broadband. • Transportation is a major concern as people have to travel for jobs and shopping.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet based businesses can thrive with on-line orders • Younger generation wants to stay on the farms. • Younger generation wants to live in rural settings.
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing is difficult to find • Broadband is weak or nonexistent • Cell phone reception is weak or nonexistent • Transportation for the elderly or shut-ins

Additional Resources

Kansas Rural Center On Youtube

(<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLHfd8ooMjd4vhuDrRT0Lbg>)

KRC Town Hall: Rural Revitalization on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC-W3iRUSkw&t=1945s>)

Prairie Turnip Farm on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfr6DyCGI&feature=youtu.be>)