



REVITALIZATION COMMISSION

Insights from Listening and Learning Sessions: September 2024 to January 2025



Dr. Kyle C. Kopko
Chairman

REVITALIZATION COMMISSION

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Harrisburg, PA 17120

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Chairman's Message

On behalf of the Pennsylvania Rural Population Revitalization Commission, I am pleased to present this report, summarizing the content of the 10 listening and learning sessions held between September 2024 and January 2025. The Commission partnered with the seven local development districts within the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) territory and Adams Electric Cooperative, Inc., to host these listening and learning sessions. We are truly grateful for the support of our hosts and their efforts to ensure the vitality of our rural communities across the Commonwealth.

Additionally, it is important to note that this report is the inaugural publication of the Commission. This publication would not have been possible without the hard work of the Commission members and the hundreds of stakeholders who took part in our listening and learning sessions. At each of the listening and learning sessions, Commission members met with rural community members and local officials to hear recommendations on early priorities that the Commission should address. And, more importantly, Commission members heard region-specific policy recommendations to combat the challenges caused by population decline in our rural areas.

Despite the many difficulties that our rural communities face, I am firmly optimistic for our future. As you will see in the summaries of these listening and learning sessions, our rural stakeholders suggested a wide range of policy recommendations related to housing stock, local capacity, youth retention, workforce development, broadband access, healthcare sustainability, the attraction of new residents, and other important issues.

When facilitating these listening and learning sessions, I emphasized that these sessions were not the only opportunity for members of the public to engage with the Commission; these sessions were simply an introduction to the Commission. In the coming years, it is critical that we engage with, and rely upon the expertise of, rural stakeholders to develop recommendations for new legislation, regulatory change, and/or community best practices to support our rural communities. To that end, I encourage stakeholders to contact the Commission with suggestions and feedback. The Commission can be reached at commission@rural.pa.gov or (717) 787-9555. Finally, I encourage members of the public to visit our website for more information at www.rural.pa.gov/commission.

We look forward to hearing from you as we collectively work to support the nearly 3.4 million people who live in our rural communities.

Sincerely,

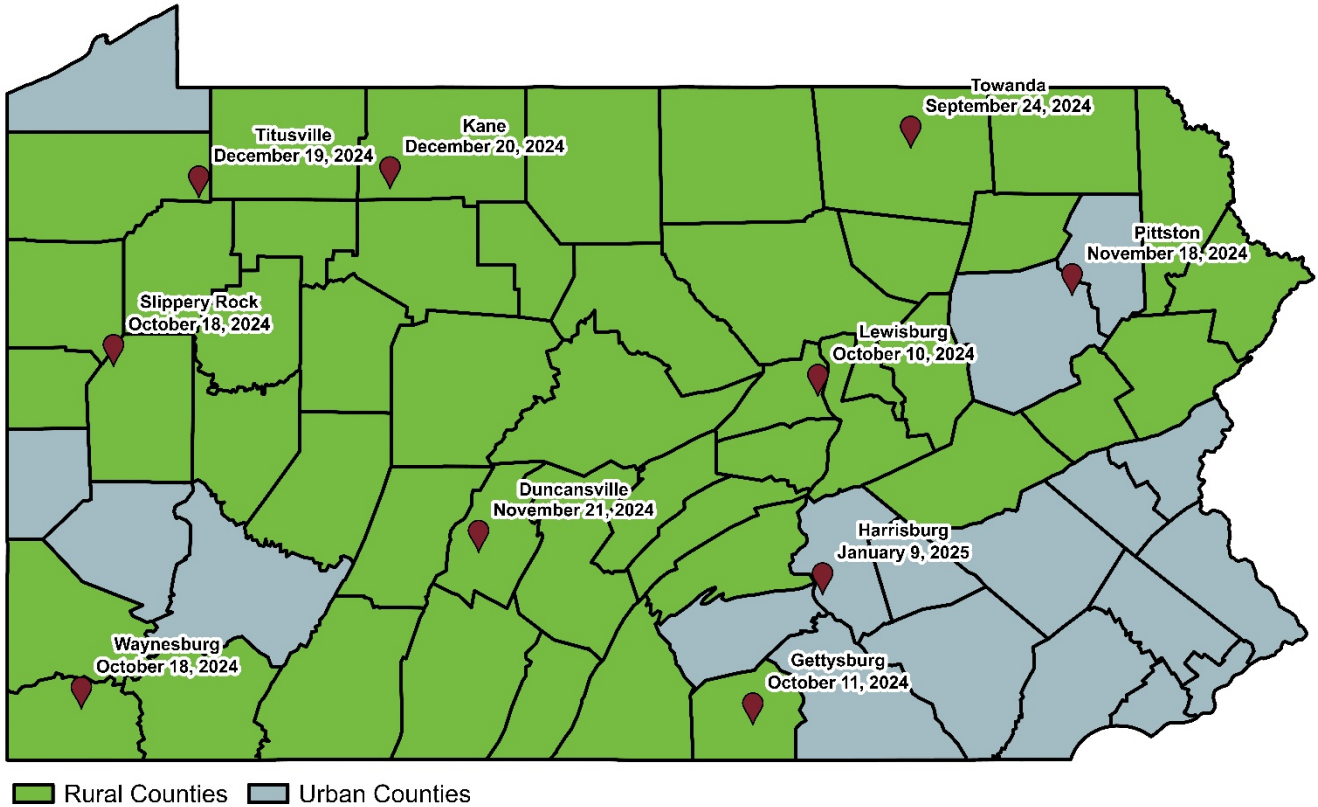
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Chairman, Pennsylvania Rural Population Revitalization Commission
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Locations of the Pennsylvania Rural Population Revitalization Commission Listening and Learning Sessions



Towanda, Bradford County – September 24, 2024

Host: Northern Tier Regional & Planning Development Commission

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Demographic Challenges

- Anticipated population decline affecting rural areas in Pennsylvania.

II. Grant Funding and Support

- Challenges in obtaining funding through programs like Bridge Investment Programs (BIP); need for more accessible application processes.
- Evaluation of metrics for grant funding to prioritize impactful projects.
- Tiered system for grant applications.

III. Healthcare Access

- Recruitment and retention of healthcare providers, especially OB/GYNs for rural labor and delivery.
- The role of telehealth and competitive salaries to attract medical professionals.
- Need for subsidizing healthcare initiatives.

IV. Service Concerns

- Elderly Care: Need for improved geriatric services.
- Child Care and Workforce Development: Essential for attracting families and retaining young residents.

V. Infrastructure Needs

- Housing: Critical for economic development and resident retention.
- Broadband Access: Necessary for education, health care, and business; concerns about ineffective funding structures and excessive red tape (e.g., Bradford County struggling to fund fiber-optic lines).
- Natural Gas Service: Lack of service hampers economic opportunities.

VI. Education

- Need for competitive educational offerings in rural schools.
- School consolidation discussions to improve efficiency and reduce costs.
- Eliminate excessive positions.



- Lack of Career and Technical Education (CTE) opportunities in some areas.
- Importance of career pathways and coaching for high school students.

VII. Economic Development

- Balancing development with preservation of rural atmosphere.
- Importance of community revitalization and tourism.

Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Revise Grant Funding Processes

- Streamline grant application processes to reduce burdens on applicants and improve local capacity/funding access.
- Develop a tiered system for grant applications to ensure equitable access to resources. Recognize that rural communities may not have the same rate-of-return on investments as urban areas.
- Promote more broadband funding opportunities with streamlined application processes.

II. Enhance Healthcare Access, Geriatric Services, and Maternal Care

- Improve access to healthcare services for the elderly population.
- Provide maternal care to rural counties with no maternal health provider and for residents commuting for maternal services.
- Implement incentives to attract and retain healthcare providers in rural areas, including higher salaries and telehealth services.
- Subsidize healthcare initiatives to improve access and quality of care.

III. Increase Child Care and Workforce Participation

- Bolster childcare facilities in rural areas to support families and ensure workforce participation.

IV. Invest in Infrastructure

- **Housing Initiatives:** Create programs to support affordable housing developments for middle-income residents.
- **Broadband Expansion:** Establish fiber optic infrastructure and simplify funding processes for broadband access.
- **Natural Gas Services:** Expand access to natural gas in rural areas to boost economic opportunities.

V. Education/Career Development Opportunities

- **School Consolidation:** Explore county-wide administration.

- CTE Development: Invest in Career and Technical Education programs.
- Career Pathways: Introduce career coaching in high schools to prepare students for local job markets.

VI. Support Economic Development

- Encourage community revitalization efforts and tourism initiatives that align with the rural lifestyle.
- Lower taxes for small businesses; provide incentives for business development in rural areas.
- Model policies after competitor/growth states like North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Florida.



**REVITALIZATION
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Lewisburg, Union County – October 10, 2024

Host: SEDA-Council of Governments (COG)

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Housing and Community

- Affordable housing is critical for retaining young people in the community.
- Lack of community resources and sense of belonging for new residents.

II. Workforce

- Challenges in retaining young professionals and connecting them to community identity.
- Careers in the trades are not heavily promoted in some school districts, leading to workforce shortages (e.g., contractor availability).

III. Transportation and Infrastructure

- Transportation and infrastructure issues adversely affect access to health care and employment.

IV. Health Care

- Social determinants of health impact community well-being.
- Increased demand for healthcare services due to an aging population.
- Non-clinical strategies needed to improve overall health care in the community.

V. Taxes

- Need for incentives for capital investment and human capital investment in the region.

VI. Community Integration

- Lack of community cohesion for individuals moving in, particularly for younger generations.
- Blight and uneven development across rural communities affect their overall appeal.



Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Youth Engagement and Connection

- Develop community-oriented opportunities for youth engagement.
- Create more "third spaces," such as makerspaces, to foster connection.
- Promote collaboration between community colleges and local schools for retention initiatives.

II. Education and Workforce Development

- Enhance programs like Keystone Central's initiative for youth to earn credits and secure employment.
- Increase state funding for school districts based on job placement success.
- Expand initiatives such as the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit and Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs like Ready Central PA to provide immediate job placements for students.
- Engage youth in community planning efforts like Future Innovators of Shamokin (FIOS), a school-to-work program which involves students in Shamokin community planning.

III. Infrastructure Development

- Address blight in communities to make areas more inviting for potential newcomers.
- Involve community members in land-use decisions, especially regarding solar development projects.

IV. Childcare Support

- Introduce substitute aid programs for Early Childhood Education (ECE) facilities to fill staffing gaps.
- Offer childcare tax credits to businesses, enabling them to provide better wages to employees.

V. Healthcare Solutions

- Address social determinants of health through transportation support and community health programs.
- Explore non-clinical strategies to enhance community health services.

VI. Support for Nonprofits and Municipalities

- Assist with permits and support community events to encourage local engagement.

- Support regional networking to assess, communicate, and address the ramifications of current demographic trends.

VII. Incentives for Community Growth

- Implement relocation incentives for white-collar and remote workers to boost population.
- Develop a closing cost assistance program for families moving to declining areas.
- Facilitate recruitment efforts for companies outside the state to establish operations in rural communities.
- Proactively market the high quality of life in rural communities to attract new residents.



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Gettysburg, Adams County – October 11, 2024

Host: Adams Electric Cooperative, Inc.

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Population Decline and Demographic Changes

- Dwindling population affecting community vitality.
- Growing senior population, shrinking youth population.
- Lack of incentives for youth to stay.

II. Capacity Building for Rural Communities

- Need for local capacity development among municipal officials.
- Importance of regional planning efforts beyond local municipalities.
- Running out of space for industrial and commercial development.

III. Zoning and Land-Use Issues

- Farmland is dwindling due to zoning policies that may not promote other land utilization.
- Costs/benefits of county-level control of farmland in Maryland versus municipal control in Pennsylvania.

IV. Infrastructure Challenges

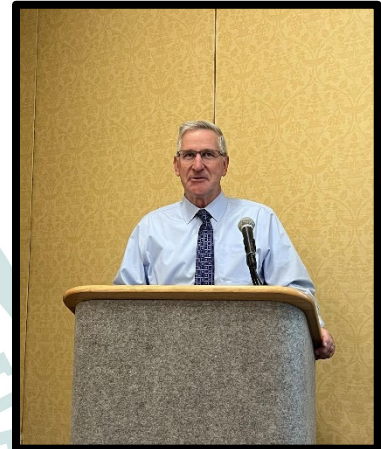
- Inadequate wastewater treatment and sewage systems in Pennsylvania.
- Concentrated development areas in Maryland reduce farmland use.
- Challenges with broadband access limiting economic opportunities.

V. Education

- Lack of funding for the Adams County Technical Institute; turning away a significant number of students.

VI. Housing Affordability and Taxation

- Worsening housing affordability issues in rural areas.
- High property taxes are burdening households and impacting retention.
- Overbuilding of senior housing leading to market saturation.



VII. Community Engagement

- Lack of community involvement by young people.
- Need for bipartisanship and cohesion in local government.
- Perception of stagnation, with 70 percent of the workforce commuting.

VIII. Diversity and Inclusion

- Balancing diversity while preserving rural life.
- Need to remove negative connotations around diversity in rural settings.

Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Economic Incentives for Population Growth

- Implement relocation incentives with potential moving grants.
- Establish reverse scholarship programs to encourage students to remain in the community post-education.

II. Enhancing Infrastructure and Capacity

- Invest in broadband expansion to improve access and connectivity.
- Develop a comprehensive regional planning framework for farmland conservation and economic development.

III. Zoning and Land-Use Reform

- Review and revise zoning policies to promote better land-use practices.
- Consider adopting Maryland-style policies to preserve farmland and promote concentrated development areas.

IV. Investments in Transportation and Freight Rail

- Invest in transportation infrastructure to improve access to essential services.
- Support freight rail development to facilitate economic growth and enhance regional connectivity.

V. Support for Educational Institutions

- Secure funding to support technical education for local students.
- Enhance collaboration between technical schools and local businesses to ensure alignment with workforce needs.

VI. Addressing Housing and Tax Issues

- Explore policies to reduce high taxes on households and shift funds to support affordable housing initiatives.

- Implement measures to balance senior housing development with the needs of younger residents.

VII. Promoting Community Engagement

- Create programs to foster youth involvement in local governance and community activities.
- Encourage bipartisanship in local government to enhance collaboration on community issues.

VIII. Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives

- Engage different ethnic communities in land stewardship and agricultural initiatives to promote ownership and participation.



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Waynesburg, Greene County – October 18, 2024

Host: Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC)

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Demographic Changes

- Potential for out-of-state residents to move back to Pennsylvania.
- Larger aging population and changing household structures.
- Challenges in retaining young people and attracting a skilled workforce.



II. Housing Affordability

- Necessity for affordable housing options.
- Impact of zoning regulations on housing choices.

III. Blight and Infrastructure

- Presence of blighted properties and vacant lots in communities.
- Need for infrastructure upgrades in declining areas.

IV. Zoning Challenges

- Outdated zoning laws affecting housing diversity (e.g., multi-family vs. single-family homes).
- Local zoning restrictions hinder new development.

V. Workforce Development

- Need for education and training to build a future workforce.
- Attraction of workers to fill available jobs in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

VI. Municipal Capacity and Resources

- Lack of capacity in some boroughs to fill staff positions.
- Challenges related to lack of resources to explore/implement municipal consolidations and/or partnerships.

VII. Broadband and Connectivity

- Insufficient broadband access affects recruitment and retention of residents.
- Importance of connectivity for teleworking opportunities.

VIII. State Intervention and Funding

- Insufficient state support to address water authority issues and blight.
- Local matching requirements are a barrier for state/federal funding and revitalization efforts.

IX. Access to Maternal Care

- Need to improve access to maternal care in order to attract and retain young residents looking to start families.

Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Comprehensive Planning

- Develop comprehensive plans at the county level to address housing and zoning issues, and other matters that are not traditionally addressed in the comprehensive planning process.

II. Promotion of Commuter Housing

- Explore opportunities for "commuter" housing to accommodate workers traveling from neighboring states.

III. Blight Remediation

- Establish programs to demolish blighted properties and repurpose vacant lots for new developments.
- Ensure that zoning facilitates redevelopment of blighted/demolished properties.

IV. Zoning Reform

- Modernize zoning regulations to support diverse housing options, including multi-family and single-family homes.
- Promote cooperation between zoning authorities and property owners.
- Expand local capacity to facilitate updates to zoning ordinances.

V. Workforce Education

- Invest in educational programs tailored to the needs of local industries to prepare a skilled workforce.
- Engage young people through educational pipelines/partnerships and seek their engagement on regional matters.

VI. Municipal Consolidation

- Incentivize voluntary municipal consolidation and/or partnerships to improve service delivery efficiency and resource allocation.

VII. Broadband Expansion

- Develop initiatives to enhance broadband connectivity, drawing inspiration from successful models like Chattanooga, Tennessee.

VIII. State Support for Infrastructure

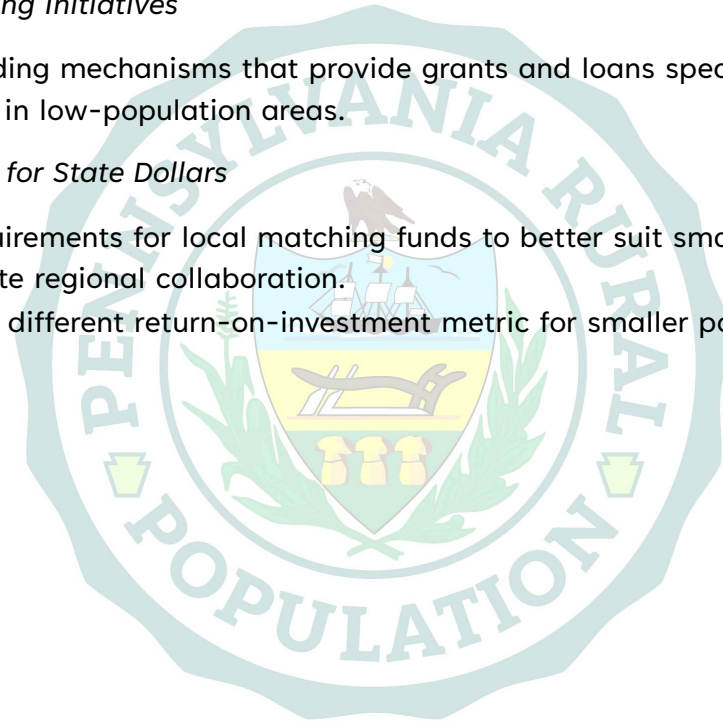
- Advocate for state intervention in water authority issues and funding for infrastructure improvements in struggling communities.

IX. Targeted Funding Initiatives

- Create funding mechanisms that provide grants and loans specifically for developers in low-population areas.

X. Local Matching for State Dollars

- Revise requirements for local matching funds to better suit smaller municipalities and promote regional collaboration.
- Establish a different return-on-investment metric for smaller populated areas.



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Slippery Rock, Butler County – October 18, 2024

Host: Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC)

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Economic Development

- Need for recreational economic development.
- Streamline government funding and contracting for infrastructure projects.

II. Housing

- Affordable housing concerns, including mobile home units and modular homes.
- Market costs and local match requirements affecting housing expansion.

III. Broadband Access

- Need for expanded broadband to underserved areas.
- Importance of ensuring BEAD (Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment) funding is effectively utilized.

IV. Workforce Development

- Partnerships between workforce institutions and educational systems.

V. Transportation

- Infrastructure development needs and transportation access.

VI. Health Care/Maternal Care

- Declining rural healthcare facilities are affecting population growth.
- Need for improved healthcare services, particularly for the growing population of older adults.

VII. Youth Retention

- Youth retention and the challenge of young farmers transitioning into sustainable careers.
- Integrating students into rural communities and promoting education.

VIII. Climate and Environmental Concerns

- The impact of climate change on population movement (climate refugees).



- Local initiatives needed to address environmental sustainability.

Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Economic Development

- Ease burdens of match funding for housing and infrastructure projects through programs like RACP (Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program).

II. Affordable Housing Initiatives

- Explore options for modular homes and promote diverse housing solutions.
- Explore the creation of “pod” housing.
- Using education systems as an asset; prioritize retention over attraction with housing availability/affordability.

III. Broadband Strategies

- Implement aggressive strategies for broadband deployment, targeting underserved areas and partnering with universities for internet mapping (e.g., Indiana County’s broadband strategies; aggressively bringing in state/federal resources, many remote workers).
- Ensure that Pennsylvania has a permanent Broadband Office, similar to other states, after the expiration of federal funding.

IV. Utilize Anchor Institutions and Educational Partnerships to Enhance Workforce

- Foster collaborations between educational institutions and local industries to enhance workforce readiness.
- Leverage educational and community institutions to attract and retain youth.

V. Repurposing and Investing in Educational Facilities

- Utilize vacant university buildings for community health and educational initiatives.
- Prioritize investments in public education and post-secondary education institutions (e.g., Colorado’s education model).
- Support the College of Osteopathic Medicine at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

VI. Regional Collaboration

- Foster regional cooperation across Pennsylvania to share resources and strategies.

VII. Industrial Development Council

- Establish a council focused on recreational and industrial development projects.

VIII. Improvements to Health Care

- Explore innovative models for rural healthcare delivery and partnerships to improve maternal care services.

IX. Cultural and Community Engagement

- Develop community “third spaces” and after-school programs to engage youth and promote STEM opportunities (e.g., Kids Innovation Playground).

X. Streamline Government Assistance

- Create an infrastructure development team to provide better technical assistance and simplify grant processes.

XI. Prevailing Wage Considerations

- Address issues with prevailing wage laws that hinder project completions and affordability.

XII. Support for Family Farms

- Expand funding and resources for agriculture, including the Agriculture Innovation Fund.
- Increase automation in family farming; farming is a second occupation for many people.
- Increase opportunities for young farmers under the age of 35 years old.

XIII. Rodeo Center Project

- Revise plans for a new rodeo center to attract visitors and boost the local economy (e.g., Armstrong County).
- Need for government funding and assistance with contracting.

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Pittston, Luzerne County – November 18, 2024

Host: Northeastern Pennsylvania (NEPA) Alliance

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Aging Population and Demographic Shifts

- Pike/Wayne Counties: Significant elderly populations; geriatric care needs.
- In-migration from New York/New Jersey for retirement.

II. Population Change and Housing Issues

- Monroe County: Population shifts; housing includes more second homes.
- Pocono Region: Seasonal housing demand (summer housing).
- Schuylkill County: Revitalization efforts in Shenandoah; blighted properties.
- Housing Stock Issues: Need to support existing housing and find creative solutions to increase housing units.

III. Workforce Shortages

- Dental Care: Lack of dental providers in rural areas; only three dental schools in the state.
- EMS Services: Declining volunteer numbers; aging volunteer pool (many volunteers are 65+ years old).
- Nursing Shortages: Rural area nurses needed.
- Childcare Providers: Shortage of childcare providers, particularly for second/third shift workers.
- Healthcare Staffing: Shortages in rural healthcare facilities; lack of staffing.

IV. Economic and Wage Issues

- Low Wage Rates: Lower take-home wages in rural areas.
- Job Creation: Need for more local job opportunities.

V. Healthcare Access

- Limited healthcare services in some counties.
- EMS Co-op Programs: Need for better EMS support and co-op programs for local volunteer services.



VI. Need for Child Care

- Childcare Funding: PA lags behind in investing in childcare infrastructure, especially for infants to pre-K.
- Staffing Shortages: Chronic issues with childcare provider staffing.

VII. Public Infrastructure and Development

- Need for better development and infrastructure in rural communities to prevent further economic decline.

Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Housing and Development

- Housing Action Plan: Support the Governor's Housing Action Plan, including down payment assistance, closing cost assistance, and creating better pathways to homeownership.
- Creative Housing Models: Explore mixed-use housing models and the creative reuse of blighted properties.
- NeighborWorks: Support organizations like NeighborWorks to assist with revitalizing communities and increasing local housing availability.
- Placemaking and Economic Development: Focus on placemaking strategies to attract and retain residents.

II. Workforce Development

- Co-ops for High School Students: Create cooperative education programs for high school students to gain real-world experience, particularly in healthcare and technical fields.
- Clinical Careers: Develop micro-careers or clinical internships through hospitals and healthcare facilities.
- Trade Schools: Focus on trade school education to meet the region's workforce needs.
- Exposing Children to Vocational Education: Increase exposure to vocational schools and career paths early in life.

III. Economic Incentives

- Delayed Payment Plan Legislation: Support legislation that allows for delayed payment plans for student loans.
- Interest-Free Loan Payments: Advocate for interest-free loan programs to help ease financial burdens for students and workers in rural areas.
- Financial Incentives: Provide financial incentives to attract workers and businesses to rural areas, particularly in health care, education, and other essential services.

IV. Health Care and Dental Care

- Local Pipeline: Develop local pipelines for students interested in healthcare careers, encouraging them to stay in the region.
- Dental Care: Incentivize dental professionals to work in rural areas; increase the number of Pennsylvania-based dental students.
- EMS Co-op Programs: Establish and expand EMS co-op programs to provide training and staffing solutions for local emergency services.

V. Childcare and Early Education

- Universal Pre-K: Implement a universal pre-kindergarten system (e.g., Colorado model).
- Statewide Childcare Funding: Increase funding for childcare and early education programs, including addressing staffing shortages.
- Child Care for Non-Traditional Shifts: Address the lack of childcare providers for second- and third-shift workers.

VI. Local Capacity

- Local Organizational Capacity: Build the capacity of local organizations to drive community development and problem-solving.
- Support for Local Communities: Explore ways to better match funding with local capacity to implement solutions.

VII. Community and Regional Collaboration

- Wayne Tomorrow: Follow the model of Wayne Tomorrow, a think tank focused on community-driven solutions for rural areas, especially in areas like fracking, community meetings, and local collaborations (<https://waynetomorrow.com>).
- Countywide Collaboration: Encourage local collaboration between municipalities, schools, and community organizations to tackle challenges like revitalization, housing, and child care.

Duncansville, Blair County – November 21, 2024

Host: Southern Alleghenies Planning & Development Commission

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Housing

- **Affordable Housing Shortages:** Rural areas face a lack of affordable housing due to high construction costs and limited investment. Many developers avoid these areas due to lower population density and perceived financial risks. This leads to a lack of quality housing options for local residents.
- **Blight and Rehabilitation:** Municipalities in rural regions are struggling with aging or abandoned properties. There is a failure to rehabilitate old housing, contributing to blight and deteriorating neighborhoods, making areas less attractive to potential residents.
- **Mismatch in Housing Needs:** The current housing stock is primarily single-family homes, which may not cater to the diverse needs of the population, including elderly residents, young families, or individuals with disabilities.



II. Transportation

- **Access to Health Care:** Many rural areas have lost critical healthcare services such as maternity wards, requiring residents to drive over an hour for care. The lack of accessible transportation options exacerbates this issue.
- **Infrastructure Gaps:** Poor road networks and limited public transportation make it difficult for people to access work, school, and health care, contributing to isolation in rural communities.

III. Health Care

- **Healthcare Facility Closures:** Many rural hospitals are consolidating or closing, limiting healthcare options for residents in these areas. For example, the closure of certain emergency rooms or maternity wards forces residents to travel long distances to receive care.
- **Workforce Shortages:** There is a critical shortage of healthcare professionals in rural areas, including doctors, nurses, and mental health workers. This shortage makes it difficult for residents to access timely care and places additional stress on existing healthcare facilities.

- **Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services:** A lack of mental health facilities and substance abuse treatment options is contributing to rising challenges in rural health care, with limited access to professionals or emergency psychiatric care.

IV. Workforce and Child Care

- **Labor Shortages:** There is a high demand for workers in essential sectors, especially healthcare and trade industries, in rural areas. Immigrants, particularly those from Southeast Asia, often face barriers to integration, such as isolation and a lack of community support, which makes workforce retention difficult.
- **Childcare Access:** Affordable and accessible child care remains a barrier for working families, especially in rural areas where options are limited, forcing many parents to choose between staying at home or missing out on employment opportunities.

V. Municipal Resources

- **Limited Local Government Capacity:** Many rural municipalities lack the resources or funding to address infrastructure and housing needs effectively. This leads to a reliance on state-level programs and initiatives that may not always align with local priorities or realities.

Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Housing Solutions

- **Pilot Housing Programs:** Implement pilot programs, such as Governor Shapiro’s \$10 million initiative for mixed-use housing, to provide affordable living spaces that combine residential and commercial developments. This can help attract developers to rural areas by making projects more financially viable.
- **Housing Rehabilitation Incentives:** Develop tax incentives or low-interest loan programs for communities to rehabilitate and repurpose abandoned homes and buildings. These programs could target blighted properties to restore them as affordable housing options.
- **Mixed-Use Development:** Encourage developers and communities to build mixed-use housing complexes that include not only homes but also retail, healthcare, and community spaces. This could help attract more people to rural areas by offering convenient amenities (e.g., community “makerspaces”).
- **Employer-Based Housing Programs:** Implement housing incentives for employers to help attract workers to rural communities. This could include offering housing subsidies or tax credits for businesses investing in housing for their staff.

- **Incentivize Rural Relocation:** Offer financial incentives, such as tax breaks or student loan forgiveness, to attract young professionals and families to rural areas, encouraging them to move for employment opportunities, especially in health care and education.

II. Infrastructure and Economic Growth

- **Infrastructure Development:** Invest in rural infrastructure, including improving road systems and public transportation, to reduce isolation and make it easier for residents to access health care, education, and employment.
- **Outdoor Recreation and Tourism:** Develop outdoor recreation programs, parks, and tourism initiatives that can attract new residents and workers to rural areas. These programs can also promote economic development by creating jobs in the hospitality and service sectors.
- **Regional Collaboration:** Foster collaboration between municipalities to develop comprehensive housing and economic growth strategies. For example, local governments could work together to create affordable housing solutions that are regionally coordinated, maximizing resources and minimizing competition.

III. Healthcare Solutions

- **Healthcare Workforce Expansion:** Expand pathways for international medical professionals to work in rural areas by improving licensing processes, offering visa support, and creating incentives for healthcare providers to practice in underserved regions.
- **Addressing Healthcare Facility Closures:** Advocate for legislative action to prevent the closure of essential services in rural hospitals. This could include providing grants or low-interest loans to rural healthcare facilities to help them stay open and competitive.
- **Telemedicine and Remote Care:** Increase investment in telehealth infrastructure to improve access to healthcare for rural residents, especially for mental health, chronic disease management, and general consultations. This would help alleviate some of the transportation barriers for residents.
- **Independent Practice for Nurse Practitioners and Physician Assistants:** Allow nurse practitioners and physician assistants to practice independently in rural areas, as seen in Maryland. This would help fill the gaps in healthcare staffing and improve access to care.
- **Expand Mental Health Services:** Invest in programs that expand access to mental health services in rural areas, including training for local professionals and integrating mental health care into primary care practices.

IV. Workforce and Immigration

- **Attract Immigrant Workers:** Develop targeted programs to attract immigrant workers to fill critical roles in health care, agriculture, and skilled vocations. These programs could include providing housing, language assistance, and cultural integration resources to help immigrants settle in rural areas.
- **Legal Immigration Pathways:** Establish clearer legal pathways for immigrants, with streamlined processes for obtaining work visas or permanent residency. This would help fill workforce shortages, especially in industries where local labor is scarce.
- **Workforce Development for Trades:** Create specialized training programs for trades, such as carpentry, plumbing, and electrical work, to meet the needs of rural communities. Partner with local community colleges or vocational schools to create accessible and affordable certification programs.
- **Support for Spouse and Family Integration:** Develop programs that encourage new workers to bring their families with them and integrate them into the community, including spouse employment programs and childcare solutions.

V. Information and Best Practices

- **Interstate Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing:** Encourage collaboration with other states that have successfully addressed rural issues. For instance, examining successful policies from Tennessee or the Midwest on workforce development, housing, and health care could provide valuable insights for rural areas in need.
- **State Conferences and Data Gathering:** Organize state-wide conferences where stakeholders can share data, best practices, and innovative solutions. This could include gathering more granular data on rural needs and developing evidence-based policies.

REVITALIZATION
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Titusville, Crawford County – December 19, 2024

Host: Northwest Commission

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Local Capacity

- With many local officials “wearing multiple hats,” it is difficult to address many long-term issues.
- Communities often do not have the matching funds for grant programs.
- Rural communities need professionals who have experience and knowledge in economic and community development.
- Many communities and organizations are not able to offer a competitive wage for a variety of professionals.



II. Housing and Zoning

- There is concern regarding the amount of publicly owned land in rural communities. Such land cannot be developed and cannot be taxed.
- There are challenges in hiring staff and community planners.
- Inability to have consistent/unified zoning ordinances.

III. Workforce and Jobs

- Challenges with retraining older people who have retired and are rejoining the workforce.
- It is difficult to find new caseworkers for human services positions.
- County-level jobs cannot compete with the private sector.
- The tax base is dwindling in rural areas, but local governments are still mandated to provide public services.

IV. Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) and Grant Funding

- Building costs and labor requirements make RACP projects difficult to achieve.
- Rural communities had little success with any of the funding programs within the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA).
- Grants and competitive funding are burdensome for communities and organizations that do not have staff or capacity.
- The inability to account for indirect costs can make pursuing grants cost prohibitive.

V. Public Education

- School districts have been harmed by the reallocation of funds to cyber charter schools.
- There is concern that cyber charter schools are not providing the same level of quality education as brick-and-mortar.

VI. Transportation

- A lack of public transportation has severely limited the workforce in rural areas.
- Public transportation that is available in rural communities often does not allow workers to reach their place of employment in a timely manner.

VII. Business Development

- It is difficult to launch a start-up in rural areas.
- Lack of wet lab spaces for the biology and research sector, despite rural communities being an excellent location for such operations.
- Pennsylvania has multiple taxing structures that are less streamlined when compared to other states.
- Generally speaking, Pennsylvania lags behind other states in streamlining business permits, license requirements, and similar requirements.

VIII. Additional Concerns

- Aging population of volunteer firefighters and EMTs.
- Lack of broadband, 5G/LTE, and cell service.
- Communities struggle to get information from the state.
- The closing of churches and religious schools is causing a population decline in rural counties.

Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Local Capacity

- Consider modifying state policies, requirements, or funding mechanisms to account for the unique conditions in rural communities.

II. Housing and Zoning Reform

- Establish a RACP-type program for new and affordable housing in rural areas.
- Implement business-friendly practices from a statewide perspective. Policies to attract businesses to areas, especially in relation to zoning and broadband.

- The community highlighted the unified development ordinance, which has already been introduced in several states. They oppose siloed zoning, emphasizing that a unified ordinance would streamline development processes.

III. Education Initiatives

- Support tax credits for out-of-state students to stay in Pennsylvania after completing school.
- Support funding for staff to provide local capacity.
- Enact cyber school reform to address the flow of dollars from school districts to cyber schools.
- Implement a policy or program to assist with higher education costs, targeting both current students and those from out-of-state, for a specified number of years. Consider adopting a model similar to Alaska's approach, which incentivizes individuals to pursue education in the state and remain there to teach.
- Support flexibility in regulations for rural areas, especially regarding school certifications for teachers, human services professionals, etc.

IV. Transportation

- Support public transportation pilot programs similar to CATA Go (<https://www.catabus.org/catago>).

V. Creation of Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

- Support an entrepreneurial ecosystem, similar to Penn State LaunchBox (<https://invent.psu.edu/programs/pa-innovation-hubs>).



REVITALIZATION
COMMISSION

Kane, McKean County – December 20, 2024

Host: North Central Pennsylvania Regional Planning & Development Commission

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Housing and Land Use

- People from urban counties are moving into areas with higher levels of disposable income and are buying houses with cash. This impacts the older community and younger, first-time homebuyers who do not have similar capital or finances.
- Limited housing inventory remains a challenge. Much of the available housing stock is older, often requiring rehabilitation and potentially failing to meet the needs of buyers. Many communities face significant blight, but there is a lack of funding needed to restore these properties. Additionally, publicly owned, non-taxable properties place financial and development pressures on rural areas.



II. Health Care

- Rural communities cannot attract and retain a young population when this area is a maternity care desert.
- Hospitals cannot be viable due to the Medicare/Medicaid insurance reimbursement rates.
- There is a healthcare desert in the North Central region, not just a maternity desert.
- It is unrealistic to expect residents in rural areas to commute to urban areas for medical care.
- The downsizing of hospitals has placed burdens on county human services offices.

III. Technical Education and Workforce Training

- There are not enough options for trade schools, certificates, and two-year degrees in rural areas.
- Many of the CTCs in the area are at capacity and cannot meet demand.
- There are not enough students to replace the professionals in the workforce.

IV. Workforce

- Professionals in rural communities are aging. There are not enough young lawyers and doctors to replace those nearing retirement.

- In-demand professionals need a place to live, but there is not sufficient housing stock.
- Lack of broadband service to support remote workers who may want to move to rural communities.

V. Child Care

- Child care is expensive, and people have moved around the area for available child care. Daycares cannot hire workers due to low pay. At the same time, daycares do not want to charge parents more to pay the workers more.
- Available daycare options are currently operating at full capacity.

Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Housing and Land-Use Initiatives

- Develop a regional strategy to assist people who want to move back to the area.
- Consider relocation incentives, especially for younger people with families.
- Develop community strategies to help with building and maintaining resources, infrastructure, and various amenities (i.e., shopping and entertainment).
- Support incentives for housing development in rural areas.
- Consider supporting welcoming committees to attract and integrate new residents into rural communities.
- Support incentives for first-time homebuyers and elderly residents in rural communities.

II. Competitive Funding Programs and Incentives

- Reconceive competitive funding programs and incentives.
- Ensure that programs like RACP address the needs of rural populations.
- Consider support for a PA SITES program that focuses on housing.
- Create incentives to attract in-demand jobs in rural communities, including doctors and lawyers.
- Devise a strategy to bolster childcare wages that does not burden parents with additional costs.
- Offer a financial incentive to move back to Pennsylvania.
- Develop a website that shows the communities that offer various incentives, amenities, etc., for individuals who want to move to Pennsylvania.
- Consider a line item in the state budget for community-based leadership programs.
- Review and catalog the unfunded mandates that are pushed upon county governments and work to alleviate them, especially in light of decreasing tax revenues.

- Ensure that communities are compensated for the loss of tax revenue due to the expansion of publicly owned, non-taxable land.
- Support incentives that allow developers to build houses in rural communities without suffering a net loss.

III. Workforce and Immigration

- Rural communities could explore bringing professionals into the community from outside of the U.S. There needs to be a legal pathway for this option, while avoiding stigma associated with international in-migration.



**REVITALIZATION
COMMISSION**

Harrisburg, Dauphin County – January 9, 2025

Host: Pennsylvania Rural Development Council (RDC)

Outline of Key Issues Discussed:

I. Housing

- Rent is often unaffordable given the wages for many jobs in rural communities.
- Rural communities do not have the type of housing stock that families and younger people are now looking for.
- The state needs to take a more comprehensive view of the housing and housing stock in Pennsylvania, specifically, when it comes to blight, zoning, and redistricting.
- The Commonwealth should carefully assess the advantages and disadvantages of regulatory frameworks regarding housing and housing development, and then make appropriate regulatory changes in light of that assessment.



II. Infrastructure and Tax Incentives

- Utility infrastructure is a problem in rural areas and can inhibit development.
- Other states provide more competitive tax incentives and less regulation.

III. Education

- Transportation of students is often a problem for many rural school districts.
- Schools provide a cultural identity for many areas and communities, which makes it hard to regionalize school districts.
- There are insufficient vocational education opportunities for students. Many of the vocational technical schools have waiting lists, and demand exceeds their capacity.

IV. Healthcare and Emergency Services

- Ambulance and emergency services are struggling in rural communities.
- Municipalities do not have the capacity to support these efforts as population declines and tax bases dwindle.

V. Local Capacity

- Rural communities are often unaware of the funding and resources that are available for local governments.
- Local Development Districts (LDDs) cannot continue their full range of services with the end of COVID relief funds.
- There is a shortage of people who are interested in serving as local officials, and they would benefit from additional training. Many people do not desire to be a local official in a rural community.

VI. Community Understanding

- Rural communities need to break the stigma of regionalization and recognize that in some cases it may be an advantage.
- Not all residents in a rural community want the community to change. Yet, inaction will likely lead to negative economic and fiscal impacts. The Commonwealth and local officials must find an effective way to convey information about population change so that residents understand the importance of this issue.

VII. Broadband

- Many issues in rural counties are tied to a lack of broadband connectivity.
- Many counties are left to figure out broadband and connectivity issues on their own.

Outline of Policy Suggestions:

I. Housing, Infrastructure, and Tax Incentives

- The state can partake in housing development districts.
- Ensure that Pennsylvania's tax incentives are competitive with neighboring or competitor states.
- Recognize that rural areas often have similar challenges and issues as urban areas. However, rural areas do not have the same infrastructure, capacity, and resources to address these issues.

II. Education

- Schools should start career training in high school. Students need to be more aware of the jobs that are not only available in Pennsylvania, but also the ones that are needed in the future.
- Ensure that universities adapt to workforce needs; this includes professional programs for those who are already employed or may be between jobs.

III. Healthcare and Emergency Services

- Municipalities and other local agencies should seek to establish collaborative partnerships to collectively meet the needs of their region and communities.
- Explore emergency services partnerships, like the merger of three independent EMS/fire agencies in Lycoming County.
- Expand the use of mobile medical clinics in rural areas to ensure a baseline of services. Penn State College of Medicine is participating in the use of mobile clinics in rural areas, especially with oral and primary care.
- Provide start-up funding for innovative healthcare solutions in rural areas, such as clinics.

IV. Local Capacity

- The Commonwealth should improve communication with rural communities to promote funding and resources to local governments and organizations.
- Establish support for LDDs so that they can continue to provide capacity support for rural communities and local governments.

V. Community Understanding

- The Commonwealth needs a better way to market Pennsylvania to new residents.
- When crafting policy solutions, the Commonwealth needs to develop community-centric solutions to solve them, recognizing that regions of the Commonwealth vary in many respects.

VI. Broadband

- Counties have not always shared what has worked the best for them when solving and addressing broadband issues. The communities that are struggling want this information, and there needs to be a guidebook on how to duplicate the success stories.

REVITALIZATION
COMMISSION

Pennsylvania Rural Population Revitalization Commission



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Senator Judy Ward



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