

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## Center for Rural Pennsylvania Hosts Public Hearing on Rural Population Change

**GREENVILLE, MERCER COUNTY** – The Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors recently hosted a public hearing on rural population change at Thiel College in Greenville, Mercer County. Elected officials, alongside local business leaders, healthcare representatives, and education professionals, engaged in discussions addressing the challenges posed by the ongoing population decline in rural areas. Testifiers provided insights into potential policy changes based on the Center’s recent population projections to 2050.

“The Center is committed to providing comprehensive research, community outreach, and policy recommendations to aid the General Assembly and rural communities,” said Senator Yaw, Chairman of the Center’s Board of Directors. “The Center’s recent projections and following hearing are instrumental in guiding proactive measures for the resilience of rural Pennsylvania. As Chairman, I will continue to support the Center’s research endeavors to ensure prosperity for our rural areas.”

“I want to thank the Center for Rural Pennsylvania for coming to Mercer County to have these important conversations so that we can work together collectively to come up with proactive solutions to address some of the challenges facing rural PA,” said Senator Michele Brooks (R-Mercer). “I also want to commend the panels for providing compelling and innovative testimony that touched on all the vital issues facing Northwest rural counties, including those right here in the 50<sup>th</sup> Senatorial District.”

“I am very pleased that the Center for Rural Pennsylvania held its hearing in Mercer County,” said Rep. Parke Wentling (R-Mercer). “We rely on population projections to assess future demand for resources such as food, water, and energy, as well as services such as health and education. It is important we begin discussions now so we can craft policies that can be adapted for various projection scenarios.”

Key points from the hearing included:

- **Urgent Need for Broadband in Rural Areas:** Broadband infrastructure is crucial for economic growth, improving healthcare access, and enhancing education in rural regions. Suggested solutions include more federal investments in broadband infrastructure and telemedicine programs, collaboration between insurance companies and local hospitals, and initiatives supporting municipalities and school districts to address declining populations.
- **Challenges in Rural Healthcare:** Rural healthcare providers are facing difficulties due to population decline, aging demographics, and the need for more staff and quality care. Telemedicine and merging are seen as potential solutions to bridge gaps in healthcare access in rural communities.
- **Housing Availability and Affordability:** The availability and affordability of housing are critical issues in rural areas. Without adequate housing options, attracting and retaining residents,

especially skilled professionals, becomes challenging. The presented solutions for rural development initiatives emphasize the need for more funding, accountability, and partnerships between stakeholders.

- **Community Engagement, Especially Among Youth:** Engaging the community, particularly the youth, is essential for addressing rural needs effectively. Involving younger generations in community development efforts can ensure the sustainability and relevance of initiatives aimed at rural growth. Solutions for engaging youth include community-based leadership programs, civic engagement, and partnerships to support youth excellence.
- **Education Reform:** Education reforms are necessary to sustain K-12 and higher education institutions in rural areas amid enrollment and funding challenges. Recommendations include implementing shared services, fostering partnerships, and enacting regulatory reforms to support educational infrastructure and quality in rural education.

“The public hearing summarized the interconnected challenges confronting rural communities, stressing the significance of collaboration, innovation, and targeted investments,” said Dr. Kyle Kopko, Executive Director of the Center. “Now is an opportune time for planners and policymakers to consider these discussions and adapt to the changes that are likely to develop in rural Pennsylvania in order to support its revitalization and long-term sustainability.”

Testifiers included:

- Mark Critz, Western Regional Director of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and Executive Director of the Rural Development Council
- Jill Foys, Executive Director of the Northwest Commission
- Thomas Kreiner, McKean County Commissioner
- Albert “Chip” Abramovic, Venango County Commissioner, and Board Chair of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania
- Kate Brock, Executive Director of the Community Education Center of Elk and Cameron Counties, and Leadership Elk and Cameron
- Rod Wilt, Executive Director of the Penn-Northwest Development Corporation
- Andrew Sokolski, Executive Vice President of Strategic Alliances, Whirley Drink Works, and Member of Warren Worx
- Amanda Hetrick, Superintendent of the Forest Area School District
- Dr. Susan Traverso, President of Thiel College
- Janice Walters, Interim Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer of the Rural Health Redesign Center

Access the written testimony and video recording of the public hearing on the Center’s website at [www.rural.pa.gov/news-events/public-hearing/rural-population-change-2024](http://www.rural.pa.gov/news-events/public-hearing/rural-population-change-2024).

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