

# Horizons

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## A Community-based Strategy for Rural Development

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Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice; it is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.  
--William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925)

Rural communities can control their own destiny. Whether faced with a declining economy or a booming one, communities can take a step back, adapt, and develop their own vision. Successful rural development enables communities to determine and achieve their own future.

Rural development is not simply economic development. No matter which strategy rural areas choose, they must be able to compete. There is a new recognition that economic development activities and physical readiness, while necessary for communities, are by themselves not sufficient. Issues such as the quality of the workforce, the quality of life, and the provision of human support services are all critical to the economic vitality of rural communities. Other factors that affect community viability include access to decent health care, indoor plumbing, recreational opportunities, child-care availability, and a quality education system that can prepare students for the 21st Century. A complete approach to rural development recognizes and supports these varied issues and needs.

Rural development should enable rural communities to achieve a stable economy and a

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decent quality of life while maintaining their rural character. To achieve those goals, rural development must make the most of the physical, human, and financial resources available in a rural area. Given that a community--not outside forces or actors--should determine its destiny, rural development is most successful as a community-based approach. Such an approach does not mean that a rural area works in isolation; rather, it means that state and federal agencies and the private sector recognize the great diversity in rural areas, and they support communities' efforts with responsive and flexible policies and programs. The recognition of community diversity is one key reason why Virginia decided to pursue a community-based rural development strategy.

### The Diversity of Rural Virginia

There is no *single* rural Virginia. The diversity of rural Virginia is seen in the coal fields of Southwest Virginia, the farms of the Shenandoah Valley, the fishing villages of the Eastern Shore, and the textile plants of Southside Virginia. And just as geography and economies vary across rural Virginia, so, too, do the people, their culture, and their traditions.

No single statistic or demographic trend describes all of rural Virginia. Consider, for example, the following:

- Although the population of rural Virginia as a whole increased in the last decade, a number of rural counties lost population.
- Rural Virginia is both affluent and poor. The median household income in Virginia's rural counties ranges from \$14,618 to \$45,222.

- Poverty rates for individuals in rural counties range from single digits to almost 30 percent. In some of Virginia's rural counties, two of every five children live in poverty.
- In many cases, the communities with the greatest need to provide jobs and alleviate poverty have the least-ready workforces. In a number of rural Virginia counties, more than 40 percent of people over age 25 have not graduated from high school.
- Rural Virginia has a diverse economic base with significant contributions from agriculture, fishing, forestry, manufacturing, mining, and services. These sectors are supported by a generally strong transportation network, quality institutions of higher education, and tremendous natural resources.
- Some isolated communities are suffering very high unemployment due to the closing of manufacturing plants, the loss or decline of a dominant industry, or technological and productivity improvements that result in job losses. For example, in the six counties that constitute far Southwest Virginia, mining employment has fallen from 26 percent of the labor force to 20 percent, and now lags trade-sector employment. Overall, Virginia's rural economy had an unemployment rate in March 1992 of 8.5 percent, compared to 6.8 percent for the state as a whole.

The challenges and issues facing rural Virginia are as diverse as the statistics. During April and May of 1992, the Center on Rural Development (CORD), assisted by the non-profit Corporation for Enterprise Development, held several regional community forums to discuss rural issues and the potential assistance that CORD and other state agencies could provide to rural communities. Representatives of a variety of interests attended the forums, which were held in Abingdon, Culpeper, Melfa, Roanoke, South Hill, and Warsaw. The forums highlighted the diversity of needs, concerns, and strategies of Virginia's rural communities, both within regions and across the state. While the forum results are not a statistical sampling of the rural population, they do provide an idea of some of the pressing concerns in rural Virginia.

Economic development was the issue of greatest concern to the participants, but the focus of that concern varied across the state. Expansion of

entrepreneurship and of small-business opportunities was a recurring theme at each forum. Loss of jobs was listed as a critical economic development issue by many forum participants. Other aspects of economic development cited by forum participants included promotion and marketing of the local economy, tourism, development of industrial sites, the need for more "value-added" industries, agricultural diversification, retention or modernization of local business, and the availability of capital.

Besides economic development, several other broad issues were cited by participants as significant. These issues included the following: provision of infrastructure for water, sewer, and drainage; the need for affordable, safe, and sanitary housing; transportation infrastructure; facilities for solid and hazardous waste; the need to consider environmental concerns in infrastructure and economic development; adult education, lifelong learning, and literacy; health care; and community leadership and citizen attitudes.

Clearly, a myriad of challenges faces rural Virginia. While certain issues may be more significant in some regions than in others, a number of *fundamental* rural issues need to be addressed: economic opportunities, jobs, workforce skills, housing, infrastructure, and the long-term capacity of communities to perform needed functions or services. The *specific* needs of communities differ, however, so the responses to those needs will also differ.

#### **A Community-based Rural Development Strategy: Why and How?**

The approach to rural development should be community based for a number of reasons. First, rural communities are very diverse. No single strategy or program can meet all their rural-development needs. Second, rural communities' distinctiveness can make them more competitive in the global economy, so they must capitalize on their uniqueness. Third, people in a community know the most about their own needs and assets. They can best determine what direction their rural development efforts should take, and what destiny they want to achieve. Finally, it is critical that the community have "ownership" of their rural development strategy; for any strategy to be truly effective, there must be a local commitment--a "buy-in"--to the strategy. Rural communities will be more supportive of a strategy that local citizens develop to support the citizens' goals and visions for their community.

A community-based strategy requires first a clear definition of the community--a recognition of who or what the community is--along with a sense of community among residents. One definition of "community" in Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* is a "a body of individuals organized into a unit." A community is not necessarily defined by physical location or geographic boundaries, but by individuals joining together.

Historically in rural areas, people formed communities to build the schools, raise the barns, worship at the churches, and join together at social functions. While people in rural areas still gather together to worship and to socialize, often the sense of community has been weakened by greater mobility, fewer shared interests, and emigration of rural residents to cities and suburbs. At the same time, as residents commute to jobs and shopping, the traditional community may have broadened.

Given these changes, local leaders and citizens are challenged to think about what defines the community. They must be inclusive, rather than exclusive. They must recognize the geographic, economic, and social patterns that tie people together. Then, in the final analysis, the community must define itself.

Once a community has defined itself and fostered a sense of unity, a significant commitment of time and energy is needed to develop a unified strategy that supports all residents of the area. The community needs to develop its own vision and strategy for rural development, because each rural area in Virginia is unique, with its own assets and liabilities. While no one "cookie-cutter" strategy will work, all community-based rural development strategies should have the following basic characteristics:

- Represent a broad segment of the community;
- Recognize the resources and limitations of the community;
- Recognize all assets of the community--physical, financial, and human;
- Capitalize on the unique resources and skills of its residents;
- Complement the community's quality-of-life objectives; and
- Include a vision for the community with specific goals and objectives.

These are the *local* elements of a community-based rural development strategy. To have a successful community approach, however, state and federal agencies and the private sector must also take actions that recognize and support the uniqueness of each community.

## The Center on Rural Development's Response

CORD was created in August 1991 by Governor Douglas Wilder in response to clear messages from the 1990 Rural Development Conference in Roanoke. Conference participants called for a grass-roots, community-based approach to rural development and for more flexibility in state policies and programs targeted to rural areas.

CORD's focus is to provide technical and financial assistance in rural areas to help rural communities achieve their development goals and visions. CORD recognizes the diversity of rural Virginia and views it as a great strength of the Commonwealth. However, that diversity also places a burden on state and federal government to be responsive to communities and design policies and programs as flexibly as possible.

CORD views rural development as a comprehensive endeavor that should cut across disciplines and look for linkages among needs, issues, and strategies. Unfortunately, governmental programs are usually designed to address only one need or issue. One of CORD's roles, therefore, is to work with communities and state and federal agencies to improve these linkages and explore more creative, coordinated approaches to rural development. While development efforts in any locality--whether rural, urban, or suburban--are best served by a comprehensive approach, rural localities often lack the staff, technical expertise, or resources to support a comprehensive approach. CORD can provide technical and financial assistance to help rural communities design more comprehensive development strategies.

## Where Does Community-based Rural Development Lead Us?

A successful community-based rural development strategy reflects the assets and strengths of the community. Rural Virginia is characterized by its abundant natural resources and beauty. The beauty and rural character must be preserved, but rural Virginia's communities also must recognize and nourish their human resources. Achieving strategies that recognize, appreciate, and balance both human and environmental needs is crucial to the future success of rural Virginia.

Communities are taking the first steps in achieving balance through identifying diverse development opportunities such as entrepreneurship, tourism, industrial development, agricultural diversification, health-care centers, and telecommunications-based strategies. The diversity in these efforts reflects the diversity of rural Virginia and its communities. Each community must choose its

own strategy and control its own destiny. But once a community chooses, it must receive support from the federal, state, and private sectors to implement its strategy successfully. A community cannot reach its full potential without support from the other participants in the rural development process.

Just as individuals make up a community, communities make up the Commonwealth of Virginia. If any part suffers, it brings down the whole; when any part succeeds, it benefits us all. It is in everyone's interest to foster and promote rural development efforts, and the diversity in these efforts will strengthen the Commonwealth as a whole.

*For more information on the Center on Rural Development, readers may contact CORD at 804-371-7075 (note: until August 1, CORD's number is 804-371-2665).*

## NOTICES

\* A new REAP Report examines the advantages and disadvantages of various methods for managing risk in dairy farming. *Risk-Management Strategies for a Representative Virginia Dairy Farm*, by Darrell Bosch and Christian Johnson, is available free from Extension Distribution, Landsdowne Street, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0512, (703) 231-6192; the publication number is 448-208/REAP R009.

\* A new REAP periodical, *The State of Rural Virginia*, will provide up-to-date information on and analyses of rural Virginia's economy. REAP Research Associate David Broomhall will use the periodical to examine such issues as educational funding, employment and income trends, and the effects of world economic and technological changes on rural Virginia. The emphasis will be on a graphical presentation of information in a concise and useful format. The first issue, which introduces the publication, and the second, which examines access to emergency health care and other health-care issues, will be sent free to all *Horizons* recipients. A nominal subscription fee will be required for future issues. Watch for this new REAP product in your mail soon.

*For more information, please contact REAP at Hutcheson Hall, Rm. 216, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061-0401; telephone (703) 231-9443.*

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