



*Investing in Rural Capacity:*

# Key Findings Around Community Planning, Leadership and Governance

A Comprehensive  
Summary of Findings  
from the National  
Rural Development  
Stakeholder Listening  
Sessions

February 2023

# KEY FINDINGS AROUND COMMUNITY PLANNING, LEADERSHIP and GOVERNANCE

## Summary of Survey Findings

**Community planning, leadership, and governance** in rural communities was a cross-cutting theme that emerged from the initial stakeholder survey. The issue was identified under the topic of community vibrancy, alongside issues of youth and inter-generational engagement, placemaking, and population change. This issue stood out as a recurring theme because it is the strategy by which other topics are identified, prioritized, and subsequently addressed. The quote at right is from a respondent who ranked Community Vibrancy as a priority topic while also recognizing the cross-cutting themes across priority topics. By applying a community and economic development planning approach, researchers were able to group topics into social, economic, and environmental outcomes, listed below, which better inform this initiative of identifying sustainable and strategic improvements for rural America.

“Many of these issues are intertwined. The initiatives and research for one topic will overlap with many others. (i.e., rural housing development, broadband access and adoption, population attraction and retention, identifying opportunities to advance workforce, economic, and entrepreneurial development ecosystems).”

—Survey Respondent

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**Physical infrastructure & public services**

Policy and zoning can affect community development and inform where future investments will be made.

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**Workforce development, training & education**

Leadership and innovative planning are needed to support emerging industries and dedicate space for entrepreneurship.

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**Community vibrancy**

Engaging youth and residents can help retain future leaders and attract new ideas for community growth and development.

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**Climate change, climate variability & extreme weather**

Forward-thinking leadership and policy are needed to mitigate and adapt to increasing climate variability in rural communities.

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**Economic development**

Local governance informs which sectors of the economy will be supported or face challenges within a community including emerging industries.

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**Health**

Physical planning efforts like trails can support healthier lifestyles and outreach can help engaged residents make informed health decisions.

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**Agriculture & food systems**

Policy can help promote access to local food systems that may subsequently lead to the development of new markets or value-added agricultural products.

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**Diversity, equity & inclusion**

Transparency, accessibility, and inclusive policies can encourage opportunities for open dialogue and help foster a sense of community.

## Findings across Survey Topics Related to Community Planning, Leadership, and Governance

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|----------------------|---|
| <b>Assets</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong sense of community</li> <li>• Social capital in the form of strong connections, trust, and shared history between community members</li> <li>• Community colleges, universities, Extension, and local schools</li> <li>• Placemaking, arts, and culture</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Challenges</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Population decline/brain drain of youth from rural areas</li> <li>• Lack of funding to expand training and development opportunities</li> <li>• Public distrust and discord on topics such as climate change, as well as community and economic development goals and priorities</li> <li>• Lack of physical infrastructure or services to connect community members with resources</li> <li>• The balance of placemaking and culture and the need to grow and change these identities or adapt them to be inclusive of new populations and demographics that are moving to communities</li> </ul> |
| <b>Opportunities</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Link local training to local needs in each rural community</li> <li>• Build capacity for civic engagement and recruitment of community leaders</li> <li>• Provide leadership training, conflict resolution training and general capacity building on the themes of outreach and civic engagement</li> <li>• Develop infrastructure and skills to support remote work and other economic development opportunities</li> <li>• Develop or improve quality of life and local assets including housing, employment, and public services</li> </ul>   |

## Community Planning, Leadership, and Governance Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on April 26, 2022
- Hosted by Western Rural Development Center
- Number of registrants: 101
- Number of participants: 10

## Recommendations for Future Investments from the Listening Session:

After presenting findings from the stakeholder survey, listening session participants were asked to identify, discuss, and prioritize future investments around community planning, leadership, and governance. Their insights are grouped below by key themes.

## Leadership and Civic Engagement

- Train or recruit community leaders for local engagement
- Identify leadership opportunities and community planning initiatives (i.e., public services and amenities) that support emerging industries like tourism, recreation, and hospitality
- Expand local community colleges and training programs by building up community resources such as broadband, transportation, and available workforce
- Collaborate across organizations and regions and use consistent messaging
- Strengthen and work across urban/rural interfaces
- Provide transparency and accessibility in the decision-making process as well as opportunities for community members to be engaged in it

“Community governance is huge. In rural communities, some don't understand leadership or the importance of economic development. Leadership in government would greatly impact the public involvement with projects.”

—Survey Respondent

## Research

- Identify alternative sources of funding for community organizations that have limited funding and capacity due to governance issues, such as the local tax base
- Create systems of best practices and share success stories
- Expand toolkits so that resources can be easily shared between communities, such as targeted community-based initiatives
- Explore regionalism for areas with limited capacity

“It would be helpful to see cases of rural communities that are successful in bringing youth back to the community. We hear often about ‘brain drain’, but what are the best practices to attract people to live in and support the community.”

—Survey respondent

## Extension

- Expand youth programming and training programs to encourage rural retention
- Provide relevant research and training on effects of climate change adaptation strategies, emerging technologies, and sustainable community and economic planning
- Facilitate community conversations and encourage public discourse to support planning efforts for new initiatives

## Intersections with Equity and Sustainability

- Foster a strong sense of community and work together to solve complex problems through inclusive practices
- Expand leadership and capacity-building opportunities on themes of diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Address climate change skepticism and create incentives to adopt new technologies in sustainable planning and resilience in food production and natural ecosystems
- Encourage regional governance to navigate regulations, land use challenges, and economic opportunities across county and state jurisdictions
- Create pathways to equal and equitable representation in community conversations

## Roles for the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs)

The listening sessions were intended to inform a broad range of rural development partners, including leaders with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Land-Grant Universities, among others. Given their focus on building capacity across organizational and state lines, the RRDCs may play several roles in advancing the strategic investments addressed in this report. These include the following themes.



**Reaching across 1862, 1890, and 1994 Land-Grant University systems to collaborate on priority issues.**



**Conducting, translating, and disseminating research through journal articles, special issues, briefs, and presentations.**



**Scaling Extension outreach through curriculum development, training, gauging impacts, and showcasing promising practices.**



**Helping to acquire and leverage funding for research, Extension, and scholarship.**



**Actively encouraging the integration of research and Extension on key issue areas.**



**Facilitating workshops, listening sessions, and dialogues for innovative problem solving.**



**Convening researchers, Extension practitioners, and rural development stakeholders on high priority issues.**



**Building and coordinating multi-state teams.**

## Notes

Information in this report is excerpted from a report titled “*Investing in Rural Capacity: Comprehensive Summary of the National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions.*” The report shares findings from a national initiative conducted through the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs).

For a comprehensive description of methods and participants, download the full report at:

<https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions#reports>

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## For More Information

More information, including the comprehensive listening session report, survey report, supplementary materials, and an interactive data dashboard, is available at:

<https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions>

Learn more about the Regional Rural Development Centers at: <https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/index>

