Overview Panel Comments

Linda Salmonson

The overall theme echoing throughout the conference has been “Reinventing Public Education.” The presenters have offered specific examples and models that appear to have significant potential for replication. However, support from both the private sector and government sector will be essential to future success. What follows is a summary of key points and recommendations gleaned from the presentations, plus some challenges and opportunities I feel bear mentioning.

The presenters demonstrated that rural America can grow its economies through regionalism and cluster-based economic development. Ideally, these regions should be self-defined and autonomous but fully cognizant that they are interdependent. Rural decline is a motivational factor in bringing people together, and collaboration offers the opportunity to increase efficiency, translating to decreased costs.

It was said that rural regions operate as a continuum of government, health and human services, education and training, community infrastructure, and the economy. In a strong economy, these areas support each other, using the economy as the engine for growth. However, in a declining economy, it is the government that is called on for support, including offering the incentives to “jump-start” the economy. This is a truly tall order in a declining economy, especially one where there is a decreasing number of people to pay the tax bills and an increasing need for services.

To truly collaborate, we were told we must leave turf at the door and learn to build trust. Ideas must come from the bottom up, as well as the top down through increased communication, follow-through, and new leadership. To achieve this ideal, we must put outcomes first, well ahead of organizational self-preservation. This could mean overcoming our loyalty to existing organizations—and organizations near and dear to us like the USDA and the Extension Service, or commodity groups.

I suggest that rather than simply overcoming our past loyalty, we should consider supporting these same organizations to reinvent themselves to better meet community needs. I heard a speaker state that “institutional memory” is approaching retirement age, and that the average age of nonprofit executives is over 55. What a wonderful opportunity for us to nurture and support new leaders. In order to do so, we also have to learn to let go. We must accept that change is positive and will lead to future growth and development. We cannot continue with business, or organizations as usual.

Here’s a challenge from Chuck Fluharty’s remarks. He stated that the ideal rural government is efficient, participatory, interactive, strategic, inclusive, reflective, evaluative, action-oriented, sustainable, crosses boundaries, learns from its mistakes, and is asset-based. We have a long way to go here, and to achieve this in rural America will truly require energetic new leaders.

The key is to be “asset-based” and build on assets, like the marriage of education and economic development discussed by many of our presenters. Also,
there is a need to investigate the link between economic development and health care (tire salesmen and newspaper publishers, notwithstanding). Rural America has wonderful anecdotal success stories that need to be compiled and shared. It has a great quality of life, as illustrated by the True North example of fishing and hunting in beautiful, northern Minnesota.

I also agree that stories and quality of life need to be supported by hard data, but a new kind of data are needed that tell the real rural story. Instead of median family income (MFI), we need data on number of jobs per family member (e.g., how many three-, four-, or five-income families contribute to the MFI). Instead of county and state population data, we need population change by age group and by self-defined community. Instead of nonfarm unemployment data, we need data on all citizens—not just those in W-2 jobs or those receiving unemployment compensation. We need data on the self-employed, sole proprietors, and ag producers as well.

In South Dakota, 70 percent of farm family income comes from nonfarm employment, and, in many cases, one of the off-farm jobs is primarily used to cover the cost of health insurance. In rural communities when an employer closes her doors and there are not jobs available, people move because they want to be productive and contribute to the community. Generic data do not address the underemployment and out-migration we see on a daily basis.

Another recommendation is to “embrace the brokers.” These brokers are advocates for change. They are the public and nonprofit entrepreneurs and organizations that are willing to overlap, compete, and collaborate with each other. They are willing to adapt and change to meet new markets and challenges. They seek and demonstrate impact; and they rely on their ability to meet community/market needs to insure their longevity. Embracing them takes risk. But isn’t that what all change requires?

In addition to giving these change agents our support, we need to hold them to high standards, such as fiscal accountability and environmental stewardship. For example, the nation’s electric cooperatives have come together under a single brand called Touchstone Energy Cooperatives. Touchstone Energy Cooperatives holds itself to the standards of integrity, accountability, innovation, and commitment to community. I suggest that the public must hold the public, nonprofit, and private institutions to similar high standards.

If change is to be effective, the fourth standard, commitment to community, must be maintained. As public, nonprofit, and private entities, we must all keep our eye on the ultimate goal—growing a vibrant rural economy. We must learn to collaborate for the community’s benefit and understand that doing our part to support a growing economy will do more to strengthen our organizational longevity than will seeking self-preservation in the name of community development. An integral part of that commitment will include supporting public entrepreneurs—the elected officials that are doing the right thing at the expense of risking re-election—and organizations that take risks to meet market needs.

Access is a word that I heard from many presenters—access to education, access to capital, and access to technology. Something else we have access to in rural America, in a way our urban counterparts don’t, is our elected leaders. Where else but in rural America are policymakers so accessible that we can have open dialog with them on a wide variety of issues? We can call them, and they return the call. They seek our opinions. Let’s make that a competitive advantage.

How can we capture new opportunities? Here are a few ideas gleaned from the presentations:

• Stop asking for permission.

• Use our resources to build true collaboration across traditional boundaries.
• Be part of the solution, not part of the problem.

• Feed the passion of entrepreneurs—make them welcome.

• Invest our own time and resources first, before asking for public support.

I commend the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI), and others for their research and opportunities for dialog on the state of rural America over the past few years. The challenge before us is to use the data and dialog to create a changing and vibrant rural economy.

In closing, what we are really talking about when we speak of a vibrant rural economy is people—who are moving a rural community and economic development agenda forward despite significant obstacles. We can demonstrate the strong work ethic that still exists in rural America.

People want to be productive, so they don’t balk at working two or more jobs to support their families. They understand the need to earn a living, so when companies close and jobs disappear they relocate to a place where there are job opportunities. And if opportunity knocks, they come back to rural America. We have to create the opportunity.

If we want a vibrant rural economy where people can live, learn, work, and grow—as the mission statement of True North suggests—we must focus on meeting the needs of our people. To remain in rural America, we need an economy that offers opportunities to grow business, build wealth, seek stable employment, and enjoy the superb quality of life.