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COALITION/CONSENSUS BUILDING FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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Fortunately, the mechanics of consensus and coalition building for rural development policy differ little—if at all—from those employed daily to forge agreement on a vast array of issues in the public domain. Unfortunately, many of the players involved with new and emerging rural development policies are not necessarily the perennial leaders of the public debate in their respective jurisdictions. Therein lies the challenge to those concerned with the well-being of our rural areas and economies in the 1990s.

Historically, America's rural policy—if it can be so-called—has been virtually indistinguishable from that of agriculture: the majority perception being that if it is addressed in the federal farm bill it will most decidedly benefit rural Americans and their communities. Whether this perception has been valid or not, it no longer holds.

Who then are these new players? Where is the new playing field? And how do these influence our attempts to build coalitions and reach consensus on rural vitalization issues?

States: The New Players

If the flow of special interest dollars; the tacit message of continued federal government inaction; and recent rulings of the Supreme Court are any measure of current policy making climate in this country, then the states are now where the action is on many major public policy issues—rural development included. State elected officials are the new leaders; state capitols are the new centers of activity and initiative; and state governments should be considered key partners in any coalition formed to address rural economic and human resource policy.

Southern Coalition

One such coalition which has successfully paired state elected officials with those best equipped to inform them on rural development policy issues and strategies—a coalition in which the Council of State Governments takes particular pride—is the one established between the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State Univer-

sity and the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee of the council's Southern Legislative Conference.

Over the past four years this regional coalition has brought to the table federal, state and local policy makers and administrators; university extension and research officials; and the private sector and citizenry to discuss a range of issues relating to both agriculture and rural development in the South. A number of broad-based, action-oriented policy positions have been thus generated.

This coalition has been a happy and productive one, and, as the council comprises three other legislative conferences nationwide, and the Southern Rural Development Center likewise has three counterpart operations across the country, the southern coalition model could be easily replicated to encompass all fifty states on a regional basis.

This type coalition for sharing ideas, expertise and insights through established federal, regional and state mechanisms is at the very heart of forging consensus on rural development policy.

From Deliberations to Legislation

Some states are demonstrating they can muster the requisite leadership to get rural policy deliberations translated into solid legislative initiatives and executive branch orders.

The results of a 1987 Council of State Governments national survey identified a wide variety of state-based, state-initiated programs designed to buttress rural economies. Some of the more noteworthy are:

Illinois

In Illinois, the Governor's Task Force on the Future of Rural Illinois, chaired by the Lieutenant Governor, was created in 1986. Subcommittees developed recommendations in four policy areas: Human Services, Agriculture, Local Government and Economic Development. In October, 1986, a five point program established the Rural Fair Share Initiative, a Governor's Rural Affairs Council, an Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University, a Center of Value-Added Agriculture at the University of Illinois, and an Agricultural Research and Development Consortium. The Task Force issued its final report and recommendations to the legislature in March, 1987.

Maine

In Maine, the Governor's Rural Development Commission was created in 1979 through a cooperative agreement between the state

and the Farmer's Home Administration. While many states signed such agreements, Maine's commission is one of the few that has stayed active even though federal funds disappeared. It serves as an advisory body on rural affairs, coordinates rural initiatives and develops policy recommendations.

Minnesota

In Minnesota, the legislature reauthorized by statute in 1985 the Governor's Rural Development Council which had been in existence since 1973. This thirteen-member body awarded grants for demonstration projects in local communities using \$1 million in interest on a Rural Rehabilitation Revolving Fund. In 1987, the legislature passed a comprehensive new Rural Development Policy Act which creates a new Rural Development Board, a rural rehabilitation pilot program and new administration procedures for the existing revolving fund.

New York

New York created by statute in 1982 the Joint Legislative Commission on Rural Resources—a ten-member bipartisan body of the legislature. It examined the problems of rural New York, sponsored conferences and continues to develop legislation. The commission's *Action Strategy for Rural New York* is broad-reaching, covering the areas of Transportation; Health Care; Human Services and Community Life; Agriculture, Environment, Community Facilities and Housing; Education; Government; and Economic Development.

During 1986 commission bills were passed to create an office of rural affairs, a special rural transportation fund, a rural health care delivery pilot project and a study of the impact of banking deregulation on rural communities. The new Office of Rural Affairs serves an advocacy role in the executive branch of state government.

North Carolina

The North Carolina Commission on Jobs and Economic Development was established by statute in 1985. Chaired by the Lieutenant Governor, their 1987 recommendations, acted upon by the state legislature, included the creation of a nonprofit Rural Economic Development Center. The center, governed by a forty-member board of directors, is responsible for creating jobs and coordinating service delivery in rural North Carolina.

Virginia

The Rural Virginia Development Foundation was one of the most innovative approaches taken by a state when it was established by the legislature in 1982. Its board of directors included representa-

tives from state and local government, universities and business. Created to provide venture capital and coordinate economic development, it has not yet been funded.

Mississippi and Texas

More recent state legislature initiatives targeting rural development include the ambitious Mississippi Farm Reform Act of 1987 and the Texas Rural Economic Development Act passed at the close of the 1989 legislative session.

All of these examples have in common a successful attempt at coalition and consensus building for rural development policy and many are the fruits of the labors of state elected officials who—perhaps for the first time in their public careers—have demonstrated new-found leadership in shepherding omnibus legislation on any issue. We need to encourage this trend.

Formalizing State Role

If we are to consider these state legislators essential partners for rural development policy initiatives, we need to formalize and legitimize their role in the rural coalition-building process. If, for example, our goal were to build a coalition for education reform policy, we would target the state chairs of the House and Senate Education committees, bodies long established in virtually every state legislature. If our mission were consensus on nursing home administration we would certainly seek to have join our coalition the members of each state's Health and Welfare Committee—equally ubiquitous legislative bodies. And any attempt at a coalition on state highway improvement policy would likewise afford us a clearly defined playing field and a preestablished team of players in the fifty state House and Senate Transportation committees.

A Home for Rural Development Policy

But what of rural development policy? For it, no such solid, policy-making “home” exists.

Given the historical linkage of agricultural and rural policy, one might expect the two issues would be debated, consensus reached and policy formulated by a single state legislative body. Each of the fifty states has at least one legislative study committee dubbed “Agriculture” under whose purview state rural policy has frequently fallen. But if the message of rural America during the 1980s is that agriculture now plays but a miniscule role in overall rural vitality; and the message from Washington is that rural development policy is now devolving to the states, do we, in fact, have standing “Rural Development” committees and “Rural Development” policy makers appointed in our state houses to whom we can turn in structuring

and focusing a rural development policy-making coalition? By and large, we do not.

Only five full, standing committees now exist in our ninety-nine state legislative chambers that bear the name "Rural Resources" or "Rural Development" as a part of their officially assigned policy-making purview, and two of these five committees are in a single state. It is certainly no task to project how many of our state legislative bodies do not currently afford us designated players nor a delineated playing field which are crucial components for successful coalition and consensus building for rural development policy. We can hardly expect cohesive initiatives for rural revitalization when rural health policy, for example, is deliberated separately from and independently of rural roads, rural schools and rural small business development.

While it seems evident that rural development policy making is coming of age in our state capitols, the challenge remains to somehow institutionalize state leadership in a policy area which offers few precedents, limited track records and a history of "homelessness" in most state capitols.

Perhaps a starting place to begin meeting this challenge is to assure that each state legislative chamber has a formally designated deliberative body whose purview encompasses Rural Development and Rural Resources issues. Developing such ownership of rural development policy at the state level will be a significant step toward any coalition we wish to establish and any consensus we wish to forge.

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