

Meeting mulls growth opportunities for rural Iowa

BY DARIN LEACH

COMMUNITIES IN RURAL Iowa are at the proverbial crossroads again. The ongoing pull between urban and rural remains strong, with leaders in rural areas many times falling short on increasing economic and housing opportunities for their businesses and residents.

But opportunities are on the horizon if rural communities commit now to finding a balance between expanding their unique qualities and attributes, while establishing regional partnerships and leveraging shared resources.

That was the message to about 300 rural leaders representing more than 60 communities who made the trek to Jefferson recently to attend the inaugural Iowa Rural Development Summit.

The event was arranged by the Iowa Rural Development Council, a group of active players involved in rural economic development across the state, including federal resources from USDA's Farm Service Agency, USDA Rural Development and USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service. The U.S. Small Business Administration and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development are also represented on the IRDC.

State partners include the Iowa Economic Development Authority, Iowa Finance Authority, state universities, as well as associations and organizations such as the Iowa Farm Bureau, Iowa



CULTIVATE OPPORTUNITY: "Identifying and working on economic and community development opportunities today will help shape a community's identity for generations to come," says USDA's Bill Menner.

Telecommunications Alliance, Iowa Area Development Group, Professional Developers of Iowa and the Iowa Association of Business and Industry.

"By gathering targeted rural community leaders, key partners and resource providers, as well as philanthropic entities, we set out to make this conference a hands-on learning environment," said

JOBS AND MORE: Don Macke with the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship encourages community leaders to "create genuine economic opportunities where people can fulfill their dreams, not just have a job."

Bill Menner, USDA Rural Development state director in Iowa and summit planning committee member. "Conference attendees gained insights into replicable rural success stories, key players across issue areas and capacity-building concepts geared toward small towns."

The conference kicked off with Chuck Fluharty, president, Rural Policy Research Institute, laying out the value of rural America in today's national economy where he said two-thirds of the country's gross domestic product is generated outside of urban areas.

"Rural communities and areas have a major advantage in their ability to rethink and repurpose themselves for the future," Fluharty said.

"They offer a tremendous opportunity for collaborative leadership and regional rural innovation. That great community you are building today is far better if it's part of a great region that has many parts working well together," he said.

RURAL POPULATION DECLINING

Population declines continue to be an issue in rural Iowa with maps presented at the conference showing that from 1970 to 2014 nearly 60 counties in the state lost more than 10% of their population, with nearly half of those counties recording 20%, or higher, declines.

It was also suggested that this trend of rural population will continue in Iowa, and that half of the counties in the state

will have fewer residents in 2040 than they do today.

Don Macke with the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship challenged community leaders to create genuine economic opportunities where someone will come back to their home area and fulfill their dreams, not just have a job.

"You will probably lose many of your 20-year-olds as they explore opportunities that take them away," Macke said. "But do you have what it will take to get them to come back in their 30s and 40s? Identify those genuine assets and opportunities today. If you invest in the talent to grow your community, you are positioning yourself for optimal success over time."

Zachary Mannheimer, vice president of creative place-making at Iowa Business Growth, suggests that in 15 to 20 years, the metropolitan areas of Iowa's largest communities, such as Des Moines, Cedar Rapids and Sioux City, will expand to anywhere within a 90-minute drive of the city.

"The increasing popularity of driverless cars, which place an emphasis on the riding experience allowing passengers to conduct work while commuting, and the expanded use of virtual workplaces, will be leading factors that will benefit rural Iowa," Mannheimer said.

ATTRACTING YOUNGER PEOPLE

Mannheimer is a firm believer that rural Iowa is in a strong position to take advantage of the large number of younger adults with creative and entrepreneurial spirits who are leaving the coasts for opportunities in Midwestern states.

"Right now these people are not coming to Iowa, they are going everywhere around us to places such as Minneapolis, Kansas City, Nashville, Austin and Denver," Mannheimer said. "However, those cities will become oversaturated in the next five to 10 years, so these young people will turn to cities like Des Moines."

"This is a major opportunity for rural communities here in Iowa right now," Mannheimer said. "Creatives and entrepreneurs are always looking for areas of the country that are affordable, that will let them experiment and where they can develop their dreams. That is something rural communities can do every day of the week and do it better than urban areas."

Leach is public information coordinator with USDA Rural Development in Iowa.



MAIN STREET: Around 300 rural leaders from more than 60 communities attended the Iowa Rural Development Summit in Jefferson recently. Presenters talked about expanding a community's unique qualities and attributes while establishing regional partnerships and leveraging shared resources.