

Minutes
Governor's Rural Affairs Council Meeting

June 17, 2003

IL Department of Agriculture Building

1. Meeting called to order by Lt. Governor Pat Quinn, followed by introductions and statements of interest in rural by those in attendance.
2. The GRAC supported legislation was reviewed with a discussion of initiatives that passed the G.A., some of which have already been signed into law. Member agencies of the GRAC should think about potential legislative topics for the veto session and next year.
3. Attention turned to issues that GRAC will address in the near future with discussions of how to make more resources available to rural areas.
 - a. promote renewable energy sources such as Ethanol and wind energy

Discussions included the need to continue tax credits for Ethanol and assistance to several producer organizations, such as in Fulton and Crawford counties, who are starting Ethanol plants. The potential for wind energy generation in Illinois, comparable to neighboring states, was raised along with the need work with groups such as in Bureau County that are trying to start wind farms. Discussions included energy conservation grants and programs available to low income residents.
 - b. earned income tax credits and how to promote in rural areas

The earned income tax credits were renewed and are of substantial help to low income residents. However, rural residents do not always make full use of these credits. Efforts are needed to encourage their use through education and assistance with filing tax forms and requests for payment. The Illinois Bureau of Employment Security volunteered its offices to provide this assistance and other possibilities were mentioned. Member agencies were encouraged to find ways to help in promoting use of these credits.
 - c. digital divide issues and need for upgrades in rural areas

Rural areas continue to lag behind metro areas in access to broad-band technology even when information technology is becoming more essential in preparing students for high tech jobs and attracting businesses. In addition, this technology is needed for telemedicine and the delivery of other essential services. Technical assistance on information technology issues is needed for local leaders and elected officials in rural areas. These issues include both infrastructure and usage by government, business, public, and education. Wireless may be the wave of the future and initiatives such as described on www.WildBlue.com were discussed.
 - d. affordable housing and ways to finance in rural areas

Disinvestment in housing, partly because of past population declines in many rural areas, has led to a shortage of affordable homes for young families or populations who now are interested in living in rural areas. Older residents sometimes live in housing that exceeds their needs because elder-friendly housing is not available locally. Innovative approaches to financing housing in rural areas are needed to accommodate residents but also to support population growth. Encouraging financial institutions to engage in programs that increase housing access is something to be pursued. Several member agencies reported on programs.
 - e. job losses and ways to revitalize local economies through training

Rural Illinois is not performing as well as adjacent states in manufacturing growth and several cities (Sterling, Galesburg, etc.) have lost large employers recently. Displaced workers in these cities must be trained for jobs with livable wages or they will leave in search of better employment opportunities. Rural areas also face competition for back office or routine jobs from Singapore, China, and other locations. This competition will increase in the future so programs are needed to help communities experiencing economic setbacks to position them for the future.

f. **Uncoordinated and duplicative public transportation**

As many as 44 counties in Illinois, mostly rural, have limited public transit available even though an increasingly elderly population and other groups rely on this transportation mode for health and other essential services. In some counties, several agencies provide transportation for select groups but are unable to serve other residents because of administrative, insurance, or other regulations. At the same time, there are inadequate funds to finance buses and other vehicles. This problem has been studied and recommendations including allowing agencies in metro areas to serve surrounding rural areas, creating multi-county mass transit systems, and financing transit on a regional level have been made. These issues should be addressed.

g. **Increased access to rural health services**

The fact that rural Illinois is losing elderly at a more rapid rate than adjacent states may reflect attempts to obtain access to better health services located in metro areas. Rural Illinois faces a shortage of medical and health care providers (personnel) including dental and mental health care. The Center for Rural Health, UI-Rockford School of Medicine, and the SIU School of Medicine are attempting to address this issue by attracting applicants from rural areas to increase the likelihood that they will return to practice there. Better access to IT and broadband may help this situation by providing specialized care to remote communities. Community Health Clinics and Critical Access Hospitals have also made inroads to improving care. Mobile vans may be an option for rural areas.

h. **Automated Emergency Defibrillators**

AEDs can save lives and should be promoted in rural areas along with instructional programs on their use. Recent legislation will improve this access. The cost of these AEDs is expected to decrease in the future and their use will expand.

4. The plan is for the GRAC to meet twice per year with member agencies working jointly on projects between meetings. Lt. Governor Quinn asked member agencies to collaborate on issues before the next meeting. Carolyn Brown Hodge (217-557-9469) will take the lead in forming working groups that can report at the next GRAC meeting on *Thursday, November 13, 2003*.
5. Carolyn asked members to send her materials to be distributed to the full group *by Friday June 20th*.
6. Meeting adjourned at about 11:45 a.m.

(Respectively submitted by Norman Walzer)