

Agricultural Outlook Forum

Presented: February 17, 2006

WHY CITIES CARE ABOUT THE FUTURE OF RURAL GOVERNANCE

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**COUNCIL MEMBER JIM HUNT**  
**REMARKS FOR “RURAL AMERICA: STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION IN**  
**SUPPORT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL COMMUNITIES”**

**DATE:** 8:15 a.m., Friday, February 17, 2006

**LOCATION:** Crystal Gateway Marriott Hotel, Grand Ballroom, Salons J, K  
1700 Jefferson Davis Highway  
Arlington, Virginia 22202

**CONFERENCE EVENT:** Agricultural Outlook Forum 2006, Prospering in  
Rural America

**PURPOSE:** This panel is part of a Conference that brings together policymakers, producers, industry and government analysts, and business leaders to discuss economic development in rural communities.

**YOUR ROLE:** To offer perspectives on “Why Cities Care about the Future of Rural Governance”; you will be part of a panel of four; each speaking for about 15 minutes. There will be a question and answer period after each speaker presents.

**OTHER TOPICS FOR THE PARTICIPANTS ON YOUR PANEL:**

- The Role of Rural Health Systems in Regional Innovation
- The Role of Counties in Building a Rural Regional Innovation System
- Rural Innovation Through Regional Approaches

**AUDIENCE:** USDA employees, producers (e.g. farmers), agri-business leaders, and local and federal government leaders

**OTHER RESOURCES:** NLC Research Brief, A Portrait of Rural America, [http://www.nlc.org/content/Files/05\\_RuralAmericaBrief.pdf](http://www.nlc.org/content/Files/05_RuralAmericaBrief.pdf) and Innovations in Rural Governance, Center for the Study of Rural America, [http://www.kc.frb.org/RuralCenter/mainstreet/MSE\\_0104.pdf](http://www.kc.frb.org/RuralCenter/mainstreet/MSE_0104.pdf).

TALKING POINTS FOR JAMES HUNT  
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CLARKSBURG, WEST VA, COUNCIL MEMBER

US Department of Agriculture; Agricultural Outlook Forum  
February 17, 2005

**Welcome and Greetings**

- Thank you, Chuck [MODERATOR].
- I have to say, it is an honor to be here this morning among a panel of such distinguished professionals to discuss a topic that goes to the very heart of building successful rural communities—that is how they are governed.
- As the president of the National League of Cities, I can tell you that NLC knows a bit about this subject.
- NLC represents more than 18,000 cities, towns and villages across America -- this includes both large and small cities as well as urban, suburban and rural communities.

- And as an advocate for cities, NLC is a key stakeholder in making sure that the future of rural communities is a vital and strong future.
- That's why I'm pleased to be here today to take part in this important conversation.

### **Changing Face of Rural Communities**

- But before I get into the conversation about governance, more specifically rural governance, I want to talk a little about the **changing face of rural communities.**
- Rural America covers more than 2,000 counties -- 80 percent of our nation's land.
- It is home to almost 59 million people -- 21 percent of the US population.

- And like their metropolitan counterparts, rural communities are increasingly diverse with a growing minority population.
- Rural America is the home of a large number of Hispanics and a growing number of Asian and Native American families. One in five are racial or ethnic minorities.
- When you think of the rural family, you can no longer imagine the Norman Rockwell image of a Nebraska farmer, or the factory worker from “Walton’s Mountain” Virginia .
- Not only are the demographics in these communities changing, the economic and social relationships between agriculture and the rural economy are changing.
- Today, seven out of ten rural counties are dominated by manufacturing, health care, education, retail or other employment not related to farming.

- There is no longer a homogenous definition of rural.
- My hometown of Clarksburg is a perfect example. Clarksburg, located in the “rural” state of West Virginia, is not a traditional rural community.
- It is, in fact, a central city whose major employers include small businesses, manufacturing, and professional service agencies.
- It is the main commercial, health care, and professional office location in the region and it is home to a large number of State and Federal Agencies, including the U.S. Small Business Administration, Federal Court House, and the Social Security Administration, among others.
- How’s that for rural?

- And just as there are many new faces in Rural America, so too are the many different types of governing bodies that oversee their needs.
- According to the Center for the Study of Rural America, however, many of our public institutions were created around the old economy. In fact, when many of our jurisdictional boundaries were drawn 150 years ago, the location of the county seat was determined by the time it took to travel there round trip by horse and wagon!
- As a result, in rural America we have many different types of governing bodies...the Rural Electric Cooperatives, Tribal Councils, Village Councils, Township Boards... Justices of the Peace, Councilors and Aldermen.
- But the end result is, I hope, the same. Through these various governing bodies, local elected officials like myself, are working collaboratively with their community stakeholders to develop and manage successful community programs.

- To truly be the new face of Rural America, we must set turf battles aside, and create new ways of reaching decisions that allow **all** the various leaders to make decisions quickly and efficiently for the sake of their communities.
- That is the future of rural governance.

### **The Power of Rural and Inclusive Governance**

- Right now as I speak to you, I have colleagues in Lexington, Kentucky and Natchez, Mississippi and many other cities around the nation who are running successful community-collaborative programs in their hometowns.
- Programs that serve as fine examples of why inclusive governance is essential to the success of rural communities.

- In communities like Clay County, Kansas, seven cities and a water conservation district are collaborating to build a suite of web sites that can be accessed in one central location. This innovative effort is allowing these cities to pool resources to expand their marketing opportunities and potential for economic growth.
- In Nebraska, South Sioux City is partnering with local businesses, industries and other stakeholders to establish a rural enterprise assistance program to help citizens interested in starting new businesses.
- In Illinois, the White County Development Group is bringing together local mayors, community leadership and businesses to retain existing jobs while they also work to attract new businesses in order to bolster economic development for their community.

- And in Oregon, a group of four rural cities in Marion County have formed The Friends of the Family initiative with the local school district to bring social services to young families across the region.
- These examples show how cities are shaping rural governance when turf battles are put aside: **they are doing it by bringing people together.**
- Local officials understand the benefits of leveraging resources across communities and collaborating at all levels... from citizens to government, to organizations and businesses, as well as across governments.
- And one thing they all have in common is their emphasis on **inclusion.**
- These programs bring together rich and poor, young and old, educated and uneducated.

- They increase citizen participation and engagement while promoting equal opportunity and fairness.
- And they discourage the “Us versus Them” mentality, while embracing the power of We.

### **Rural Governance Is a National Issue**

- Earlier this month our President, George W. Bush, addressed the nation and discussed the federal government’s commitment to public policy programs that keep our nation competitive and improve our communities.
- While many public policies at the national level are not explicitly “rural policies”, they have substantial implications for rural communities.

- The Community Development Block Grant, affordable health insurance coverage, medical liability, immigration, affordable energy and No Child Left Behind – all have significant affects on rural communities.
- Often people think of these issues in an urban context, but rural communities are dealing with these same challenges. And daily they are confronted with problems related to poverty, economic issues, housing, education and transportation, just as their urban cousins are.
- The best way to tackle these issues is through strong, collaborative, and inclusive rural governance. And it is absolutely essential that we ensure that our rural communities have the tools they need to stay on the cutting edge.
- At the National League of Cities, we are advocating extensively on issues which we feel directly relate to keeping our rural communities viable.

- In the area of telecommunications and franchising, we want to make sure that our rural communities are not left behind when big companies decide to pick and choose who and where they want to provide advanced telecommunications services.
- We want to make sure that funds are available for community development, for job training and for assistance for our working poor.
- Because we know that when our rural communities are not thriving, our nation will not thrive.
- The bottom line is simple: The health of rural America is linked to an effective local governance system.
- Its success will depend on innovative programs and our ability to put aside old, outmoded ways that only tend to reinforce the status quo.

- It will depend on a new spirit of discovery and collaboration between local governments and their citizens.
- The folks in North Carolina know this. They've seen what happens to their communities when the textile industry went to Southeast Asia.
- So they created the Institute for Entrepreneurship which promotes rural entrepreneurship. By providing support and guidance to small and medium-sized enterprises in North Carolina's 85 rural counties, they will help keep these communities alive and thriving.
- They understand this in Willmar, Minnesota as well, where the Heartland Community Action Agency works to connect citizens across race and class lines to bolster support and aid for families living in poverty.
- These are the new faces of Rural America.

- And they also represent the future of rural governance!

## **The Role Played by NLC**

- At the National League of Cities, we are tracking these types of initiatives and are working closely with our member cities to develop effective strategies and resources to aide cities in their governance efforts.
- As President of NLC, I have made a firm commitment to promote democratic governance and inclusion as keys steps to building a nation of inclusive communities.
- With my colleagues I am working through various initiatives...
- NLC's Democratic Governance Panel, which includes local officials from rural and urban communities, addresses challenges cities face when trying to incorporate a governance model.

- Through our Small Cities Council, local leaders from cities like Rexburg, Idaho, and St. Charles, Arkansas, have an opportunity to engage one another and provide insight on challenges they are facing in their hometowns.
- And our new Awards for Municipal Excellence program will continue to enable us to spotlight new and emerging efforts that will benefit our smaller communities.
- The National League of Cities is committed to improving the future for all of our nation's cities... big and small, urban and rural.
- Our success as an organization, as well as our success as a nation, depends on the future of our rural communities.
- Rural governance is the pathway to that success.
- Thank you and I'd be happy to take any questions.