

Opportunities for Innovation in Rural America

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Major trends in the coming decades will present opportunities for innovation in rural America and transform how we think about rural people and places. In a high-pressure market environment, a combination of key factors (risk-taking culture, ideas, capital) create a crucible for innovation. Transformative ideas are reshaping rural Phillips County in Arkansas, where a successful, replicable model for helping impoverished regions build capacity and effectively use resources is in place.

Summary

- A demand is created for change in public policy. Factors include population and economic shifts and consolidation to overcome diseconomies of scale. Growing metro political focus devalues rural contribution.
- It's a great time for rural America to make new contributions to national prosperity in four main areas: growing and processing food, energy independence, realizing economic value of nature's services, and protecting and managing rural experiences.
- Three powerful strategies for going forward: 1) regionalism – cooperation and collaboration, 2) assets – building on unique strengths, and 3) entrepreneurship – convert assets into economic opportunities
- Public policy aimed at rural innovation – economic prosperity, environmental sustainability and social equity
- Rural communities can build on unique assets, heritage, location, foods, culture, etc., as an economic opportunity.

Phillips County

- By 2010, Phillips County will be a model community for the Delta by: promoting equality among all residents, building strong leadership, advancing economic development, preserving cultural history and natural resources, and supporting education and quality health care.
- Outcomes in Phillips County: human impact- 1,000 people's lives changed and 144,000 touches/six touches per person; financial impact - \$11.7 million funded and 80 percent of the plan complete or under development
- Leadership development – 500 member Boys and Girls Club of Phillips County and Shepherd Alliance interns to build local capacity
- Economic development/economic development tourism – biodiesel facility in production testing, feasibility study for business incubator funded, Southern's BDC assisted 65 businesses and 28 classes were taught. Tourism – Civil War

- tourism plan in final stages, marketing and branding study in progress and Downtown Court Square Park in progress.
- Housing – Cleanup effort expanded; 325 properties to date, revolving loan fund for downtown established, 20-unit high-quality housing development with 100 percent occupancy since opening in 2007.

Conclusion/Remaining Questions

We need a regional approach for rural America - entrepreneurship development systems

- 1) Create a pipeline of identification and support of youth and adult entrepreneurs.
- 2) Implement a system of financial and technical support.
- 3) Foster a policy and cultural environment supportive of entrepreneurship.

How do we get rural America to think regionally?

Best Practices:

Public-private partnerships critical, quick & tangible results, local review of proposals, education and economic development priorities, focus on results not money.