

Rural Development Requires Persistence, Passion, Partnerships

By John Hart

Persistence, passion and partnerships are the hallmarks of successful rural development programs. Of all the insights presented during a recent rural development conference coordinated by the American Farm Bureau Federation, those “three Ps” were identified as key to a vibrant rural America.

Farm Bureau, a grassroots organization with 2,800 county Farm Bureaus in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, is a natural conduit for rural development initiatives since most of the organization’s members live and work in rural America. With that in mind, AFBF launched a new rural development program with a goal of improving the quality of life in rural communities across the nation.

The recent conference, held in North Carolina, focused on several successful initiatives to strengthen rural communities in that state. Many of the ideas that were shared helped plant seeds for ideas that can also be successful in other states.

One success story was that of the Pound Cake Company in Benson, N.C., owned by entrepreneurs Jan Matthews-Hodges and Bobby Jenkins. With help from the town of Benson and a rural economic redevelopment grant from the North Carolina Rural Center, the two transformed an abandoned cafeteria into a production facility that today creates pound cakes, cookies and other sweet treats. The Pound Cake Company offers employment to a number of Benson residents, many who are underprivileged and desperately needing economic opportunity.

The conference also showcased the rural North Carolina towns of Erwin and Angier that partnered with state programs to revitalize rural communities that have been hurt by economic changes. Conference participants also toured the New Standard Corporation facility in Rocky Mount that turned an abandoned factory into a new business that forges steel for dishwashers and other uses.

Paying attention to key issues such as quality health care and educational resources, and the availability of reliable high-speed Internet service are musts for enhancing rural communities. Farm Bureau is pushing hard for greater access to broadband Internet services for unserved and underserved rural areas, which will also help fill the any health care, education and opportunity gaps.

The outmigration of young people is also a major concern for rural communities. Jobs that give young people a career reason to return home are critical. Again, broadband Internet access will help create those jobs.

Deborah Markley, managing director of the Rural Policy Research Institute’s Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in Lincoln, Neb., emphasized that a “one-size-fits-all” strategy won’t work because of the great diversity of communities all across rural America. The greatest challenges for rural development are isolated rural areas where the outmigration issue is most acute, she stresses.

“Developing rural communities is important because farm and ranch families often can’t afford to stay on the farm when the school is gone, the clinic is gone and the off-farm job is gone,” she says. She points out that many young people would like to return to their hometowns if there are job to come back to.

Successful rural development requires local leaders who have the persistence and passion to improve their hometowns and the willingness to partner with others to achieve goals. Through this persistence, passion and partnership, the best days are yet to come for rural America.