Rural Futures Institute
REGIONAL FORUMS 2014
Focusing on the Future of Rural Nebraska
presented by
at the University of Nebraska
When the Rural Futures Institute (RFI) wanted Nebraskans to reflect on program priorities, it invited rural community residents from across the state to participate in a series of statewide regional forums. These forums engaged Nebraskans in conversations about how the University of Nebraska’s expertise can contribute positively to effective strategies for rural vitality.

An Eastern Regional Forum was held in Nebraska City, a Central Regional Forum in Broken Bow and a Western Regional Forum in Scottsbluff. Over 200 Nebraskans, plus visitors from three other states, participated in the forums, representing more than 50 communities.

Each forum featured a showcase of RFI grant-funded programs, tours of regional community and business assets, a community visioning activity for area youth and round-table discussions among participants focused on the Regional Forum’s central themes of:

- GROWING ECONOMIES
- ENHANCING COMMUNITY VITALITY
- ENERGIZING LEADERSHIP
Addressing Priorities

The Regional Forum’s central themes of Growing Economies, Enhancing Community Vitality and Energizing Leadership were derived from a survey of rural and community stakeholder throughout Nebraska. The stakeholder surveys also identified key issues for each of the regions, and survey respondents suggested a number of priorities to address those issues. Among the priorities:

- Fostering regional cooperation for community prosperity
- Addressing housing shortages
- Meeting workforce development challenges
- Facilitating transition of business ownership to younger generations
- Recruiting new residents and welcoming newcomers
- Respecting diversity and supporting artistic expression
- Supporting training and mentoring of younger leaders
- Investing in entrepreneurship and business expansion
- Improving uses of technology and niche manufacturing
- Contributing to value-added agriculture

Regional Tours

At each forum, participants were invited to join tours highlighting unique regional assets that reflected particular strengths in entrepreneurship, industrial development, agribusiness, health care, educational partnerships, cultural diversity, the arts and historical treasures.

EASTERN REGIONAL TOUR

- Historic treasures and tourist amenities
- Trend-setting health care innovations
- Partnerships with other institutions of higher learning
- Manufacturing strengths

CENTRAL REGIONAL TOUR

- Global manufacturing capabilities in health care
- Innovative approaches to cattle feeding
- Wind energy developments
- Housing and business development innovations

WESTERN REGIONAL TOUR

- Successful Hispanic business ventures
- Unique regional partnerships in health care and social services
- Engagement strategies involving youth and young adults
- Historical and cultural heritage celebrating westward expansion
Capturing the Vision of Youth

At each forum, local school districts and youth organizations selected area high school students to participate in a community visioning activity. The students discussed what they liked best about their community and what they hoped might be improved. In particular, they were asked what their community needs to offer to be a place they would choose to stay in or come back to in the future.

“This day was a life-changing experience for me. This the first time that anyone older has listened to what I care about!”

*High School Student*

The students worked in small teams to build the vision of their community in three dimensional models and then presented their work to the RFI Forum participants during an afternoon regional town hall dialogue. Adults heard first-hand that:

- The vast majority of young people value their hometowns
- More than half would stay or return given the right job or career opportunity
- HOWEVER

- Many are concerned about the availability of local career opportunities
- Young people perceive a lack of youth-centered opportunities beyond sports and school activities

This portion of the forums made room for youth to express their perspective and share their vision with adults who came away both impressed and encouraged by the energy and insights of the next generation of Nebraska leaders.

“The young leader visioning report was very powerful. The ideas and passion that the youth showed at the RFI meeting have generated several good conversations in our community.”

*Community Foundation Leader*
RFI Competitive Grant Highlights

Each forum highlighted several projects funded by RFI grants supporting transdisciplinary research or innovative teaching/learning opportunities in fields such as community and economic development, leadership, health care and technology.

One of the projects drawing particular attention is the Rural Community Serviceship Program, which places undergraduate summer interns in rural communities to manage a project of the host community’s choosing. These interns, over just two summer months of intensive efforts:

- Developed comprehensive community marketing campaigns
- Created innovative high school entrepreneurship programs
- Conducted groundbreaking research to build on historical assets
- Developed creative plans for agribusiness fairs, among other projects

Regional Dialogue and RFI’s Vision

A town hall style discussion at each RFI Forum engaged participants in discussion about their top priorities and how RFI, and its partners, can enhance their communities’ efforts in arenas that align consistently with RFI’s vision.

That vision is to be the “best in the world at building community capacity as well the as confidence of rural people in Nebraska and beyond to pursue their preferred futures.” With that over-arching goal in mind, RFI seeks to partner with rural leaders to identify ways to contribute to rural vitality into the future. Working from local and regional grassroots approaches, RFI seeks to help build capacity in rural Nebraska now…and for a long time to come.

“What I enjoyed most about the Forum was that the discussions were centered on the opportunities that abound in rural communities.”

Hospital Administrator
Join us for the 2015 Rural Futures Conference:

- October 21, 22 & 23
- Nebraska Innovation Campus,
  Lincoln, Nebraska
Visit ruralfutures.nebraska.edu to learn more.

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